

# Our Lady of Sorrows

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Summary: Prudy is not going to stand for Penny being around Seaweed anymore... but everyone is surprised by the drastic measures she takes to stop them. Will they overcome the distance? Or can love survive from far away? Hairspray, Peaweed, musicalverse. CH 18 UP!

## 1. The Punishment

**\*\*A/N:** I'm gonna give another whack at writing a full-blown Hairspray fic! This is, of course, another Peaweed fic, and I am SO HAPPY to be writing these two extensively again I can't even put it into words. Inspired by the tour cast of the musical, especially Alyssa Malgeri and Christian White.\*\*

**\*\*sigh-** Guess I have toâ€¦ Hairspray: not mine. Marc Shaiman's. "In the Midnight Hour" lyrics: not mine. Wilson Pickett's. I own NOTHING except a laptop, and that was a gift.\*\*

**\*\*Our Lady of Sorrows\*\***

**\*\*By Nor of Kiamo Ko\*\***

Chapter One:

The Punishment

"Hey, baby."

Penny felt arms slipping around her waist from behind as she closed her locker and grinned. "Hi, Seaweed."

He turned her around to face him and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "How was your night?"

She groaned softly and held him closer to her. "Not so great."

He sighed. "Your momma yell at you again?"

"It was the usual stuff; you know, I'm such a sinner for turning against my own kind, 'God will punish you'â€¦ nothing different." Penny tried to sound nonchalant, but she could tell Seaweed wasn't buying it.

"Don't listen to her, baby," he whispered in her ear. "She'll come around eventually."

"Yeahâ€¦ eventually," she replied distantly. Quickly, she tried to change the subject. "Anything going on tonight?"

Seaweed's face reverted back to its usual grin. "We're having a platter party at the record shop. You wanna come?"

She tried to make her smile look genuine. "Of course, Seaweed."

"Great! I already talked to Tracy and Link, and they're coming, too." He looked like he was about to say more, but the bell rang, signifying the two-minute warning. "My next class is on the other side of campus. I better get going." He kissed her again and headed off in the opposite direction.

Penny sighed and leaned her head on her locker. Yes, her mother had said all the usual things, but there was one part of the argument that she hadn't told Seaweed about.

"\_Penny Lou Pingleton, if you see that Negro boy again, I swear on God's word that I will make you sorry!"\_

Of course she was worried, but when she thought about it, she had to admit that being tied to her bed for a week would be better than never seeing Seaweed again. Her mother would just have to get used to it.

With that, she hurried off to her Geometry class, and arrived just before the late bell rang.

\* \* \*

>Penny couldn't remember being happier than she was right then.<p><p>

Four months ago, before everything had happened with Tracy and the \_Corny Collins Show\_, she never would have guessed that she would be here, dancing at a party in a record shop on North Avenue with the love of her life. Wellâ€¦ \_trying \_to dance. She was still a little stiff.

"Come on, baby, loosen up a little," Seaweed urged her, placing his hands on her hips and moving them in time with the music.

She smiled shyly and tried to relax her muscles. It workedâ€¦her arms and legs felt so much less tense.

"Good girl," he encouraged her, grinning. She beamed back, grateful for his praise whether it was deserved or not.

Penny looked across the room at Tracy and Link, who hadn't taken their eyes off each other for hours, even to talk to the other people at the party. They were dancing together, of course, and appeared to be playfully trying to top each other. She chuckled and turned back to Seaweed.

There was a scratching sound on the record player, and suddenly a slower song poured out of the machine and flowed around the room, changing the mood from fast-paced and euphoric to slower and sweet.

\_I'm gonna wait till the midnight hour\_

\_That's when my love comes tumblin' down\_

\_I'm gonna wait till the midnight hour\_

\_When there's no one else around\_

Every couple in the record shop slipped closer to each other, and it wasn't long before Penny felt Seaweed wrapping her up in a warm embrace.

They swayed gently to the music, absorbing each other without saying a word. Penny wanted that moment to last forever, and maybe it might have if one unbidden (and certainly unwanted) thought hadn't broken through her happiness.

Her eyes snapped open and she pulled away from Seaweed, who by now looked very confused. "What's wrong, baby?"

"What time is it?" Penny looked frantically at the clock on the wall that read 9:30. "Oh, \_no, \_Seaweed!"

"What is it?" Seaweed crossed the room to where she was standing and took one of her hands.

"My mother gets off work at nine-thirty! She'll be home in \_fifteen minutes! \_That's not nearly enough time for me to walk back!"

Seaweed's eyes widened. He thought for a minute, and then had an idea. "Link has a car, he can drive you. I'll get him."

"Hurry!"

A moment later, Seaweed came back across the room, dragging Link by the arm and hurriedly explaining Penny's situation.

"Would you mind driving me home?" Penny asked desperately.

"Of course not! I'll get the car started." Link ran out of the record shop, Penny and Seaweed following close behind.

Penny found the car and was about to get in the passenger seat when she noticed that Seaweed was loading himself into the back. "What are you doing?"

"I'm coming with you."

"You can't! If my mother gets home before we do, and she sees you in the car, what do you think she'll do to you?"

"If your momma gets home before we do and I'm \_not \_in the car, what do you think she'll do to \_you?" he shot back.

"I don't care about \_me,\_ Seaweed." She hugged him. "I've dealt with my mother for sixteen years. I'll be fine." With that, she gave him a fast, deep kiss and got into the car. "I love you!" she called as the '62 Plymouth drove away into the dark.

Seaweed headed back to the record shop, thinking silently, \_I love you, too. \_

\* \* \*

>Ten minutes later, Link and Penny stopped in front of the Pingleton house. "Do you think she's home?" Link asked nervously. <p>"She doesn't have a car, so I wouldn't know if she was." Penny slowly got out of the car.<p>

Link leaned out the passenger window. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"If she's home, I'll just sneak up the fire escape. She'll never know," she assured him.

"Okay," Link said with an air of nervousness. "Call the record shop if anything goes wrong, all right?"

"I will." Link and Penny had become good friends over the last few months. She knew she could count on him on the off chance that her mother knew anything.

She heard the car rev up behind her and drive away as she slowly made her way to the side of her house. Stealthily, she climbed up the fire escape and managed to make it through her bedroom window without hurting herself.

Just as she was closing the window, her mother barged in.

"\_Where have you been, young lady?\_"

"I've been here, Mother, I swearâ€"

Prudy grabbed Penny by her ear with her fingernails. "I \_know \_you have not been in this house all night. I just \_watched \_you get out of your friend's car! Now tell me the truth, you disobedient little witch," she spat. "\_Were you with that Negro boy?\_"

"I was with Tracy, Mama, really!" \_Well, I was, \_she thought to herself.

"LIAR!" Prudy raised her hand, and Penny flinchedâ€| but there was no blow. Penny looked up and saw that her mother had put her hand down.

"Go to bed," Prudy snapped. "I'll deal with you in the morning." She let go of Penny's ear and stalked out.

Penny sighed and dressed for bed. \_I should either consider myself lucky or dead.\_

\* \* \*

>The next morning, Prudy was waiting for Penny at the breakfast table. "Sit," she snapped, pointing at a chair. <p>"Mother, if I don't leave for school soon, I'm going to be late."<p>

"You're not going to school today. \_Sit.\_"

\_Oh, no!\_ Penny sat, looking warily up at her mother. Wordlessly, Prudy handed her a brochure of some kind, emblazoned with the words "Our Lady of Sorrows in South Gate" and showing a picture of three girls in plaid skirts walking in front of a large building.

"What's this?" Penny was almost afraid to ask.

"Your new school. Start packing; you're leaving tomorrow."

\*\*A/N: So... whatcha think? Feel free to say so in the form of a review. :)\*\*

## 2. The Girls

### Chapter Two:

#### The Girls

"\_Boarding \_school?"

"Tracy, it's \_awful\_" Penny wailed, digging further into the bowl of chocolate ice cream Mrs. Turnblad had prepared for them. "I read the brochureâ€"there's so many rulesâ€"it's terrible! And my mother's sending me there just so she can get me away from Seaweed!"

After packing all day, Penny had managed to escape from her house and run to the Turnblads'. She had arrived there sobbing, and Tracy and Mrs. Turnblad were trying to cure her the only way they knew how: chocolate and a shoulder to cry on.

"Penny, it's okay," Tracy said gently, giving her friend a hug. "He can still visit you on weekends, right?"

"Wrong," Penny sniffled, digging the dreaded brochure out of her pocket and handing it to Tracy, who read it aloud.

"'Visiting Protocol: All females are welcome, granted that their behavior upholds the high standards of Our Lady of Sorrows. However, in an effort to control the learning environment and keep the girls focused, males aged 14 and up are not allowed on campus, except on sanctioned Parents' Days when students' fathers may visit the school.'" The disbelief in Tracy's voice increased with every word. When she was finished with the passage, she lowered the brochure and stared at Penny, agape.

"I know!" Penny said, wiping the tears off her face. "He can't even come visit me!"

"Well, when are you going to tell him?"

Penny bit her lip and filled her mouth with chocolate ice cream.

"Penny," Tracy whispered, "you \_are \_going to tell him, aren't you?"

Digging her ice cream spoon deeper into the bowl, Penny thought about how she could possibly explain. "I \_can't\_," she finally said. "I meanâ€¦ what if he thinks it's his fault? What if he tries to get me out of it?" She looked up at Tracy with tears in her eyes. "She--my mother, I mean--might hurt him, Tracy. I wouldn't put it past her."

Tracy sighed sympathetically as she gathered her friend into another hug. "You have to tell him, Penny. He'd be heartbroken if you just \_left\_."

"I know," Penny murmured. A few stray tears rolled down her cheeks. "You'll come visit me, right?"

"Of course," Tracy assured her, giving her a quick squeeze.

Penny smiled weakly. "Thanks, Tracy."

After a moment, Tracy quietly said, "Penny?"

"What?"

"Tell him."

After Penny thanked the Turnblads and went home, she sat by the phone for hours, reaching for it, and then drawing her hand back again. No matter how hard she tried, no matter how much she tried to convince herself to tell him, she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

And so she didn't.

\* \* \*

>The next day, Prudy loaded Penny and her bags into a cab. If they had been anything like a normal family, there would have been  
<em>Don't forget to write<em>s exchanged, maybe even \_I love you\_s.

However, since they were the Pingletons, there wasn't even a goodbye as the taxi pulled away.

For the next few minutes, Penny stared out the window as the cab wove through city traffic, and then as the scenery gave way to green grass. They finally stopped in front of a large, gated brick building.

"This is it?" the cab driver asked.

\_I hope not...\_ The place looked like a prison, and that was no exaggeration; Penny \_knew \_what prisons looked like. Bars everywhere; severe, shoe-box brick dormitories; grim-faced nuns stalking around like jailers; the place had everything but uniforms with horizontal

stripes.

"Well?"

Penny was startled out of her thoughts. "S-sorry," she stammered, handing the driver his money and reluctantly stepping out of the taxi.

As the cab roared away, Penny stared up at the school and gulped. \_It's soâ€| big. And mean-looking. \_

She took a deep breath and headed up the walk. \_Here goes nothing.

\_

\* \* \*

>Penny looked down at her boarding information again: Saint Mary Hall, Room 230. She looked up at the door in front of her. <em>This is it<em>. She fumbled with the key and opened the door.

The tiny room had two beds, a desk, and a view of the next building. There was no one there but Penny, and she was glad to have a little peace while she unpacked.

After she'd taken the last of the plaid skirts out of her suitcase, she tucked her bag under her bed and flopped down on the white bedspread. She stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, letting her thoughts wander and pulling them back sharply whenever they ventured to Seaweed.

\_If I'm going to survive this place at all, \_she realized suddenly, \_I'd better get downstairs and talk to people.\_ She unwillingly stood up and took a flight of stairs down to the common room.

The furniture in the common room was simple: three couches arranged in a semicircle in the center, a few armchairs scattered around the room, a small television in a corner, and a massive Bible on a stand at the back. What Penny was most drawn to, however, was the group of girls seated on the couches in the middle. There couldn't have been more than six there, out of the fourteen or so in the dorm, but it was apparent that these were the authorities here. Penny immediately felt herself shrinking against a wall, and wished that Tracy were there with her; it was so hard to talk to people without having her best friend next to her.

She quickly considered backing up the stairs and back into her dorm room, when a girl with dark hair done up in a pompadour looked up and saw her standing there. Pompadour Girl leaned over and whispered something to her friends, and suddenly the girl at the head of the trio of couches looked straight at Penny.

"Hey." The girl, whose blonde hair was in a beehive and who was obviously the leader of the little group, beckoned Penny over. "Come here."

Penny slowly approached the sofas, careful not to look anyone in the eye. "You're the new girl, right?" the leader girl continued when Penny was sufficiently close.

Penny opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She cleared her throat.

"Umâ€¦ yes."

"What's your name, new girl?" The other girls around the sofa giggled. Penny could feel various sympathetic eyes on her from around the room.

"Uhâ€¦" \_Think, Penny! How would Tracy handle this?\_ Thinking about her best friend made Penny stand up a little straighter. She looked the leader girl in the eye and said, "My name is Penny Lou Pingleton."

The leader girl raised her eyebrows. Penny wondered if she was the first new girl who had ever talked to her like that, and felt proud. "Well, hello, Miss Penny Lou Pingleton. I'm Karen Foster." There was a short pause; Karen and the other girls seemed to be carefully scrutinizing Penny, and she felt a little like a beetle under a microscope.

When the girls were finished (\_satisfied\_ didn't seem to be the word; Karen's nose had wrinkled when her eyes had fallen on Penny's kneesocks), a girl with back-combed red hair asked, "So, Pennyâ€¦ what are you in for?" A hush fell over the room. All the girls on the couches leaned in to hear what Penny had to say, and even the girls in the corner watching TV turned away from their program.

"Huh?"

Karen sighed exasperatedly. "Why did your parents send you here?" When Penny remained silent, she snapped, "Look, P.L., no one gets sent off to Catholic boarding school for being a good little girl. Take a look at Sharon here," she said, gesturing at Pompadour Girl. "She came home lit up from drinking all night. And Janice here," she said, pointing at the redhead, "got caught in her bedroom with a boy. Cheryl," she continued, "stole money from her old man for years before she got sent here. \_What did you do?\_"

Penny noticed that Janice, the redhead, was the only one with the decency to at least act ashamed. The other girls just nodded; Cheryl was even \_smiling\_, \_like stealing money from her father was some favorite childhood game. "I didn't do anything," she said with a certain amount of pride. "Myâ€¦ my mother didn't like my boyfriend. Because of the way he looked."

The air of disappointment in the room was almost tangible. The girls at the television, eager for a good story, turned back to their show; the girls on the couches turned back to their conversations, except for Karen.

"Welcome to Our Lady, P.L.," she said quietly, in a tone that was anything but welcoming.

**\*\*A/N: I really hope and sincerely doubt that updates are going to be this fast ever again. I just had to get this out of my system. Thank y'all so much for reading and reviewing so nicely already!\*\***

### 3. The School

**\*\*Chapter Three:\*\***



**\*\*The School\*\***

Penny slipped quietly away from the sofas and fell into an armchair in a corner. She was suddenly exhausted; she had used a lot of strength in her encounter with the girls, and now felt a little bit like crying for no reason at all.

"I'd watch out if I were you," a solemn voice advised from her left. Penny turned and noticed a bony girl with thick glasses and blonde hair taken up into limp pigtails sitting on the floor, a thick book open on her lap.

"Watch out for what?"

"Karen," the girl answered simply. "She doesn't especially like most people, but she seems to have a special hatred for you. No one's ever talked to her like you did."

"How did I talk to her?" Penny, too tired to think straight, was getting confused.

"Like you weren't afraid of her. No one's ever done that on their first day."

Penny groaned. \_Maybe confidence isn't all it's cracked up to be.\_ She sank a little in the armchair and stuck her hand out to the girl on the floor. "I'm Penny Pingleton."

The girl took Penny's hand and shook it politely. "Judith Murray."

Sighing resignedly, Penny asked, "What are you in for?"

Judith smiled smugly and sat up a little straighter. "I'm here on full scholarship."

Penny smiled back. \_Maybe not everyone here is so bad.\_

"So," Judith continued conversationally, "do you know what Karen did to get herself sent here?"

"No." Penny was fairly sure she didn't \_want \_to know, and was about to get up and leave before Judith could tell her, when the blonde sighed dejectedly.

"I was hoping she'd let it slip," she said wistfully. "She's given that speech she gave you to every new girl who comes in here, and she's never \_once \_said what \_she \_did."

Penny was a little unnerved by Judith's apparent thirst for scandal. "Umâ€¦| sorry?"

"I'll bet she did something awful," she continued, ignoring Penny. "She looks like it, with her hair all ratted up like that."

\_She sounds like Mother!\_ Penny tried to change the subject. "Umâ€¦| what room are you in?"

"Three fifty-two. What about you?"

"Two thirty."

Judith's eyebrows hit her hairline. "Good luck with that, Penny."

"What?" Before she could finish her question, a nun with a stern, pointy face poked her head into the common room.

"Time for mass," she announced brusquely. All the girls immediately stood up and started filing out of the dorm, politely nodding at the nun and murmuring, "Good afternoon, Sister Ann." Penny followed their lead, and Sister Ann gave her a quick once-over, sniffed distastefully, and turned to the next girl.

Penny was completely indifferent towards the mass. It wasn't that it was boring; it was that she wouldn't have known if it was, because the whole thing was in Latin, even the hymns. When everyone stood up to sing, Penny got to her feet, sang a few notes that sounded like the melody, and sat back down as quickly as she could.

When the girls finally got back to Saint Mary Hall, it was late. Penny showered, put on one of her ugly cotton nightgowns, and headed back to her dorm room, ready to sleep.

At least, she was before she met her roommate.

Karen Foster was sitting on the bed on the left, brushing her long, blonde hair. All of Penny's things, which had been arranged somewhat neatly on the left side of the room, were now piled haphazardly on the right-side bed.

Karen smirked at her. "Sorry, P.L.," she said, fake apologetic. "This is my bed."

Penny bit her lip. There hadn't been anything on the left side when she had put her things there, and it was the first day of the private school's semester, so there was no way she could have made a mistake. Coward she was, though, she went to the other bed and began to organize her things in silence.

"So," Karen asked, remarkably sincere, "what was this boyfriend like?"

Penny turned around, eyebrows raised suspiciously. "I really want to know," the blonde pressed.

Taking a deep breath, Penny tried to think of the right words to use. "Well, he's sweet, a great dancer, he makes me laugh. He's a good person." And I love him, she thought before she could block it. She turned back to the pile of clothes on her bed and continued to sort, certain that this would be the end of the night's conversation.

Wrong. "So what didn't your mother like about him?"

"She didn't like the way he looked." Why does she want to know?

"So he was a hood. Was he really a J.D., or did he just dress like

it?" Karen's voice was taking a turn for the poisonous.

Penny whipped around, indignant. "He never did anything wrong! He wouldn't! He didn't dress like a J.D. at all! He wasâ€¦ it was the color of his skin," she finished quietly.

Karen's jaw dropped. "You dated a Negro?" Penny flinched. That was the exact word she had been trying to avoid. She knew lots of people used it, and worse, but it just seemed to carry the completely wrong connotation, one that didn't describe Seaweed or any of his friends at all. It was a derogatory word, and she felt like using it would betray them somehow.

"His name is Seaweed," she whispered, turning back to her clothes again.

Karen didn't say anything else for the rest of the night.

\* \* \*

><em>Two days laterâ€¦<em>

"Tracy, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure, Seaweed." Tracy made her way to the remote corner of the detention room where Seaweed was standing. She looked a little worried; Seaweed knew it was probably because of the serious expression replacing his usual grin. When she got there, he sat down on one of the desks so he could look her in the eye. "What's going on?"

Seaweed took a deep breath and began to speak in a low voice. "This makes the third day Penny's been missing from school," he said. "I'm really starting to get worried, and I figured you might know where she was."

Tracy gasped. "Oh, no, Seaweed, she didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" he demanded more forcefully than he'd intended. "Is she okay? Where is she, Trace?"

Tracy put her head in her hands. "Oh, Penny, how could you do something so stupid?"

"Tracy, tell me what's going on."

Tracy sighed and put her hands on Seaweed's shoulders. "Seaweed, I know this is going to come as a shockâ€¦ just try to stay calm." He tried to interrupt her again, but she shushed him and continued. "Prudy got angry at Penny and sent her to boarding school in South Gate."

Seaweed slumped back on the desk, completely thrown. Boarding school? He looked up at Tracy. "I'm not allowed to see her, am I?" She bit her lip and shook her head. "Didn't think so." He leaned back for a minute, thinking, and then looked back at her.

"Is Link using his car tonight?"

Tracy's eyes widened. "I don't think so, no."

"Think I could borrow it?"

"Umâ€¦ maybe. You'd have to ask himâ€¦"

"Great. Thanks." \_Just because I'm not \_allowed \_to see her doesn't mean I can't.\_

#### 4. The Visit

**\*\*A/N:** Oh my gosh, guys, I am SO SORRY it took me this long to update. Finals week is coming up, and the teachers have been piling on homework like you wouldn't believe. I finally sat myself down and finished this chapter, though, so don't eat me just yet.\*\*

**\*\*Chapter Four:\*\***

**\*\*The Visit\*\***

By Friday night, Penny was seriously beginning to wonder how much more she could take before she went crazy.

First and foremost, of course, there was Karen. It seemed like she couldn't go for more than a few hours without making a snide comment about Penny.

"What do you call that hairstyle, P.L.? Helmet head?"

"I would have let you borrow a pair of my shoes if you lost yours, P.L. You didn't have to steal some from your grandmother."

"With those skinny chicken legs of yours, it's a wonder you even got a \_Negro \_to date you."

Comments like the most recent one made Penny wince and clench her fists at the same time. Karen could make fun of Penny's hair, shoes, and body all she wanted, but Seaweed was beyond sacred. All Penny could do was deal with itâ€"after all, confrontation was out of the questionâ€"but it hurt so much to just sit there and take whatever the blonde threw at her.

Karen wasn't the only issue, either. Oh, no. It wasn't enough that she was trapped in a prisonlike boarding school with a girl who seemed intent on tormenting her until she died. The nuns had to be \_evil.\_

Really, she wasn't giving the Sisters enough credit. All the nuns were decidedly grim, but only one was truly evil: Sister Doris, the geography nun, who had best demonstrated her nefariousness that day in fifth period.

"Miss Pingleton!\_" \_

\_Penny jumped, startled out of her (naturally Seaweed-related) daydream. "Y-yes, Sister Doris?" she stammered.\_

"\_Miss Pingleton," the old woman warned in what could only be described as a growl, "if I have to ask you one more time what the capital of Italy isâ€¦" She trailed off threateningly, and Penny

could feel the rest of the girls in the room tense up.\_

"\_Ermâ€¦ Venice?" A girl in the front row winced. Sister Doris picked up a yardstick from by her desk and slowly made her way to where Penny was sitting.\_

"\_Hold out your hands." Penny bit her lip and closed her eyesâ€"she had a feeling she knew what was coming. A loud "smack!" resonated through the classroom, pain shivered from the backs of her hands up through her fingers, and the lesson resumed. "The correct answer to that question, class, is Romeâ€¦|"\_

Judith had later explained the story behind Sister Doris to Penny. "She's the only nun in the school who uses capital punishmentâ€"she hits people," she clarified after noticing Penny's blank look. "Technically it's not allowed, according to the school charter, since Catholic girls are supposed to be delicate flowers or something, but she's so old that they let her get away with it." Penny was in no way reassured by this, but she just shrugged.

"It's not the worst I've ever gotten." Judith looked strangely at her, but didn't say anything as she went back to her book.

And that was another thing entirely: Judith, who had at first seemed nice, was now beginning to show her dark side. Yesterday at lunch the blonde had looked up from her book and immediately seen Karen and her friends sitting at a table further away, gossiping about something or otherâ€"Penny really hadn't been paying attention until Judith opened her mouth.

"Humph," she had snorted, shutting her book. "Look at them. They're a bunch of rich, prissy airheads, every last one of them."

Penny's eyes widened. "Isn't Janice in Honors English with you?"

"And Pre-calculus," Judith admitted. "But she's bribing the nuns, I know it. There's really no way a rich Jezebel like her could be smart."

Penny was still a little shocked by that one. It seemed like everyone here was hiding something, a part of themselves, that was going to come out at the moment she least expected it.

Sighing, she rolled over and stared out the window at the few stars that she could see. \_I miss you,\_ she thought, hoping that the message would somehow find its way out of her mind and into Seaweed's, all the way back in Baltimore.

She didn't know how long she was there before she fell asleep, fully dressed. She slept deeply for once, without a single dream, and her brain appreciated the few hours of peaceâ€¦| until there was a noise at the window.

Penny's eyes snapped open, and she stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, afraid to even think about what might be at the window. There it was again: \_thunk\_. \_Her eyes darted to the window. There were another few minutes of silence, and then again: \_thunk\_. It was a stone, just a little rock, nothing to be afraid of. \_Thunk\_. Wait a minute. Why was someone throwing rocks at her window?

Penny stood up, tiptoed to the window, and looked out. She could see the next building, a few pine trees, and a tall boy cocking his armâ€¦| \_a boy.\_

She looked closer. The boy was tall and wiry, with skin the color of iced tea. No, it couldn't be.

\_Thunk.\_ She opened the window as the fifth rock hit the ground. The boy looked relieved. "Penny," he stage-whispered, "it's me."

Maybe it \_could \_be.

"Seaweed! Whatâ€¦| how did you get here?"

He shook his head. "I'll explain in a minute. Come down." Penny nodded hurriedly and shut the window a little too hard; Karen jolted awake.

"Whuzzat?"

Penny froze in the act of putting on one shoe. "I'm, uh, going to the bathroom. Sorry."

"M'kay." Karen gave Penny a suspicious look, but opted to roll over and go back to sleep. Penny let the breath she had been holding out, put on her other shoe, and ran out of the dorm.

She flew down the stairs, through the common room, and out the door into the cold night air. It was getting coldâ€¦"Penny could see her breath in front of her as she ran around the building. Finally, she managed to find Seaweed, still waiting under her window. Without a sound, he opened his arms, and she ran into them, suddenly going from the chill of the night to the warmth of his hug.

She inhaled the scent of him deeply; she hadn't gone this long without feeling him close to her in months. She slowly wrapped her arms around his neck and took a shaky breath, hoping to God that she wasn't going to cry.

"Hey, baby," he whispered into her hair. "How've you been?"

She looked up. He was smiling, but his eyes were a little troubled. "Not great."

"Me either." He kissed her forehead tenderly and murmured, "Is there anywhere around here that doesn't have so many windows?"

She nodded, took his hand, and led him to a place just off the dorms, where there was nothing but pine trees. They sat down together at the base of a giant, old one, and Seaweed took Penny's face in his hands.

"Oh, Penny," he whispered. And then he kissed her, full and deep. She kissed him back with the same fervor, touching his face with her fingertips, as though trying to prove that he was really there. He wove his hands through her hair, gently supporting the back of her head. His lips were soft and full, and they applied just the right amount of pressure on hers.

Finally, after a long time that didn't seem like nearly enough, he pulled back and rested his forehead on hers. She gave a little sigh of happiness.

"I can't believe you're here," she murmured.

He leaned back, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I can't believe \_you're \_here," he replied in a normal tone, "and you didn't tell me about it."

Penny shrank a little with shame. "Iâ€¦ I just didn't know how to tell you."

"What made you think I wouldn't find out if you didn't tell me?" Seaweed asked, half hurt, half amused. "I mean, the fact that you didn't show up for school for the past three days kind of made me think something was wrong."

She bit her lip. "I'mâ€¦ I'm so sorry, Seaweed. I just didn't want to make you sad."

Penny realized how ridiculous this statement was the second it was out of her mouth. Apparently, so did Seaweed, but he tried to be nice about it. "You really scared me when you just left without telling me, Penny." She winced, and he touched her face reassuringly as he went on. "I thought maybe you'd left me out on purpose, and you were tired of all the trouble I was causing for you."

Suddenly, Penny surprised both of them by leaning over and wrapping him in a tight squeeze. "\_Never.\_" She pulled away and looked him in the eye, feeling a little more vulnerable. "The reason I didn't tell you wasâ€¦ I thought maybe you'd think the same thing."

He smiled. "Nah, baby, you had me at 'Hellooooooooo.'" Penny turned bright pink. She remembered very well the way she'd spazzed out the first time she'd met Seaweed. He chuckled and kissed her gently. "\_I \_thought it was cute," he told her.

As much as Penny wanted to stay like that with him until morning, and through tomorrow, until the next night, she knew she had to get back to the dorm before anyone else got up. "I have to go back," she whispered sadly.

"Now?" She nodded. "Well," he said, his eyebrows drawn together and sad-looking, "okay. But not without this." He leaned over and kissed her again, this time softer and sweeter than their first that night.

After a minute, Penny quietly turned the kiss into a hug. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He let her go reluctantly, and watched her leave until she was out of sight.

## 5. The Shock

**\*\*Chapter Five:\*\***

**\*\*The Shock\*\***

Penny didn't sleep at all for the rest of the night, too elated to calm herself down. She replayed the events of earlier that night over and over, rewinding and reviewing every word, every touch, every kiss. Of course, she was dead tired in the morning, but since it was Saturday there was nothing that required her full attention.

At eight o'clock, after seven hours of blissfully lying in bed, she forced her body to get up and slowly make its way to breakfast. She picked at her food without paying much attention to what she was eating, and, when she was finished, went back to her room. She tried to be productive and do her homework (it was always there, no matter what school or city she was in), but the words from the Charlotte Bronte book *Sister Emily* had assigned over the weekend didn't make it past her eyes.

She didn't know how long she had been reading (\_Well, \_she admitted, \_spacing out is probably more like it\_) when a knock came at the door. She quickly glanced up at the clock: eleven in the morning. Her eyebrows furrowed; Karen had gotten up and left an hour ago, and she definitely wouldn't knock. Penny put down the book and opened the door.

"Hey, Penny!" Tracy held out her arms for a hug.

"TRACYYYYY!" Penny threw her arms around her friend's neck. "You're heeeere!"

"Yep!" Tracy grinned, giving her friend a quick squeeze.

"Come in!" Penny flopped down on her bed, and Tracy followed suit happily. After they giggled insanely for a few minutes, Tracy's eyes went wide and sympathetic.

"So," she asked softly, "how are you?"

Penny beamed. "Oh, I'm great!"

Tracy raised an eyebrow. "I thought for sure you'd be devastated after being away from Seaweed for this long!"

Penny leaned in closer to her friend and stage-whispered, "Can you keep a secret?"

Tracy pushed her friend playfully on the shoulder. "You \_know \_I can. Just tell me!"

Penny took a deep breath and said in a rush, "Seaweed was \_here \_last night! On campus! And I got to talk to him!"

Tracy laughed. "So \_that's\_ where he took Link's car last night. How was he?"

"Well," Penny replied with a sigh, "he was sad, and I think a little angry at me, but we managed to work something out. How are you? Anything interesting going on back home?"

"Not really," Tracy shrugged. "Poor Corny's running himself ragged trying to be the station manager and the host, but other than that, it's been pretty boring without you."



"Oh." Penny was just about to ask how Link was when the door swung open and, lo and behold, there was Karen. The blonde took one look at Tracy and wrinkled her nose.

"And who might you be?"

"I'm Tracy," Tracy replied, always polite. "What's your name?" Karen ignored the question and started in on Penny.

"Did you steal my hairspray?"

"N-no," Penny stumbled, taken aback. "Why would I take yourâ€" "

"Give it back, you little brat!"

"She doesn't have it!" Tracy snapped, going from cordial to defensive in less than two seconds. "Lay off!" For a few moments, she and Karen glared at each other; the catfight probably would have escalated to epic proportions if a voice from the hallway hadn't broken the unsteady silence.

"Hey, Karen, is this yours?"

Karen glowered at Penny and Tracy and flounced out of the room. After she was gone, Tracy turned to Penny and said conversationally, "So, I see you're rooming with Amber."

Penny groaned. "You know, I think Karen might actually be worse."

"Not everyone here is like that, right?"

"No, but most of them idolize her. It's awful."

Tracy offered a sympathetic half-smile and put an arm around her friend's shoulders. "It'll be okay, Penny."

"Thanks, Tracy."

\* \* \*

>Tracy had to leave at four in order to get home in time for dinner, but even after she left Penny could feel some of her friend's eternal optimism clinging to her. Her week began to look upâ€"she wasn't hit by any nuns, Karen seemed to run out of insults, and Judith barely opened her mouth at all. Even her homework load was relatively light. On Friday night, she went to bed hoping, foolishly, that Seaweed would show up under her window again.<p><p>

She woke up a few hours later, but not from the sound of rocks tapping on her window. Someone was shaking her so hard that she could almost feel her brain rattling around in her head. "Stop it," she moaned.

"No," she heard a voice rasp. "Not until you explain this."

Penny drowsily opened her eyes and looked up at Karen, her face partly furious and partly very confused. "P.L.," she clipped, "can

you tell me why there is a boy down there throwing rocks at our window at two in the morning?"

Penny gasped and ran to the window. Sure enough, Seaweed was there, picking up another rock off the ground. She looked at Karen, her eyes wide, furiously thinking of some way to explain it away.

"Ummmâ€¦ I have to go," she stammered, running out the door in her nightgown and bare feet. \_Smooth,\_ \_Penny. Very convincing. \_

She flew out of and around the dorm to where Seaweed was and put her hands on his shoulders. "You have to go," she whispered. "Now!"

Seaweed looked puzzled. "Why?" His eyebrows knit in concern. "What's wrong?"

"My roommate woke up," Penny muttered hurriedly. "You have to \_run, \_now, or you could get in a lot of trouble!"

"Penny, what if they find you first? Won't you get it for being outside of your dorm?"

"I don't \_care \_about me. If it helps you get out of here faster, we are \_both \_going to get in trouble if they find you with me. Now go!"

Seaweed looked at her, torn, but finally wrapped her in a quick, tight embrace. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"It's not your fault." \_And it isn't, \_Penny assured herself. \_If Karen didn't sleep so lightly, nothing would have happened.\_

"I love you," he told her as he hurried away.

Penny took a deep, shaky breath and slowly walked back to her dorm room, trying to think of how she could possibly explain what had just happened to Karen. Thankfully, when she got back to the room, the blonde was asleep. \_Maybe she'll think it was a dream, \_Penny thought halfheartedly as she crawled back into bed, not nearly satisfied with the amount of time she'd gotten with Seaweed.

The next week was going to be difficult.

## 6. The Sudden Twist

**\*\*A/N:** Merry early Christmas (and Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa, and Solstice, and all the other holidays in winter) to y'all:) I hope those of you who were curious about/love Karen (yes, you, KR :) ) are satisfied here.\*\*

**\*\*Chapter Six:\*\***

**\*\*The Sudden Twist\*\***

For the next few days, Penny was incredibly jumpy. She developed an off-putting twitch in her left eye that revealed itself whenever she saw Karen gossiping with her friends. The change was significant enough for Judith to notice one day at lunch.

"Geez, Penny, what's wrong with you today?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "I mean, sure, Karen's spread of false testimony is enough to put anyone off their lunch, but you don't have to have a spaz attack."

"Nothing's wrong," Penny squeaked, involuntarily twitching again. She took a minute to compose herself and said again, "Nothing's wrong."

"Okay," Judith conceded suspiciously, going back to glaring at Karen. "You know," she added with a touch of poison, "I bet Karen's sneaking off to meet boys on the weekends."

Penny froze. "Umâ€¦ I've never seen her."

Judith looked at Penny like a parent might look at an exasperating child. "If she does, she probably does it while you're \_sleeping.\_ She's not stupid enough to go while you're awake."

"Oh," Penny said, twitching a little. "You're, ah, probably right." Judith opened her mouth to say something else, but closed it again when she saw Penny and went back to her book.

Penny really tried to keep calm. There was a miniscule chance that Karen would think that the whole ordeal had been a dream and never say anything about it, and however unlikely that chance might have been, Penny clung to it. She avoided looking over at the blonde and her circle of followers when she could, and when she couldn't, she tried not to show any sign of fear.

After waiting for days, Penny decided that she simply couldn't take the pressure anymore. On Thursday night, she sat up in the dorm room until Karen came back from the showers.

Without looking at Penny, the blonde started digging through the mess on her side of the room for a hair dryer. Penny, however, didn't break her gaze until Karen looked up.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a snide voice.

"Iâ€¦ I wanted to talk to you," Penny said, as steadily as she could.

"Why?"

"I wanted to know why youâ€¦ why you haven't said anything aboutâ€¦ you knowâ€¦"

"Would you spit it out, P.L.?" Karen asked, rolling her eyes. "I have to blow dry my hair before it starts puffing out."

"Why haven't you told anybody about Friday night?" Penny blurted. After that, the words flowed out of her mouth before she could stop them. "I mean, not that I'm upset that you haven't said anything. I'm very grateful, actually, unless you're not telling anyone just so you can hold it over my head and make me do things, in which case you're just plain meanâ€¦"

A strange look spread over Karen's face. "Shut up," she said, not in

an unkind way, just in a way that made Pennyâ€¦ well, shut up. The blonde stuck her head outside the door, checked both ends of the hallway to make sure no one was there, and slowly shut it. Then she went to sit down carefully on her bed, facing Penny. Leaning in close, she whispered, "Do you know why \_I \_got sent here, P.L.?"

Penny shook her head furiously. "No, I don't."

Karen looked sternly at her. "You have to promise, on pain of lifelong social torment, never to tell \_anyone \_what I am about to tell you. Do you understand?" Penny nodded sincerely. "Good. Now listen carefully, because I'm not telling this story again."

She took a deep breath. "A couple of years ago, I fell hard for this boy back home. He wasn't really a boy; actually, he was more than a couple of years older than I was. He wasâ€¦ experienced. Andâ€¦ well, he looked like your boyfriend, P.L."

Penny thought she must have looked momentarily shocked, because Karen chuckled flatly. "Yeah, I dated â€¦ someone like him, too. Not just dated, really. I fell in love, or at least thought I did. He told me he loved me, too, and that got me doing some things a whole lot earlier than most people do." She looked meaningfully at Penny, who blushed, fairly sure she knew where this was going.

"I thought things would be like that foreverâ€¦" just perfect." Karen turned and looked out the window at the stars coming out. "But then I started getting sick a lot, and my parents took me to a doctor, whoâ€¦ told us the news. Yeah, they were furious, but that was nothing compared to what he did when I told him."

Karen looked baldly back at Penny. "I've never seen anyone run that fast, and I don't think I ever will again. P.L., he \_ran \_from me. I was having his \_kid, \_and he \_ran.\_" She looked back out the window. "Since marriage was definitely out of the question, I went to stay with my aunt in Georgia for a while. She was there when the baby came, and when it came outâ€¦ well, darker than anyone expected, she told my parents. Instead of pretending nothing happened and just going back to the way things were, like they would have if the baby was white, they sent me here."

She closed her eyes for a moment and just breathed, and Penny was a hair's width from leaning over and actually giving her a hug when she began again. "I thought he'd come see me, to apologize or something, but he never did, and he probably never will." She opened her eyes and stared straight at Penny. "Do you realize how lucky you are? Your boyfriend had absolutely no obligation to stay with you when you came here. He had every right to abandon you and never see you again. \_But he didn't.\_ He came to see you and talk to you and actually braved waking up your roommate to spend time with you."

"I wanted you to hold on to that, P.L. That's why I didn't say anything." And with that, she slowly stood up, found her hair dryer, and left for the bathroom, leaving Penny feeling very confused.

## 7. The Capture

**\*\*Chapter Seven:\*\***

## **\*\*The Capture\*\***

After she was completely sure Karen would keep Seaweed's visits a secret, Penny managed to calm down a little. Seaweed started coming back after a while—he wasn't one to stay away from his girl for very long (forget feminism; she was his, his, his, and she had no use for denying it)—and their Friday night rendezvous continued for many blissful weeks without a hitch. It was very easy for Penny to believe that it would simply continue forever—too easy.

On a Friday night in late November, Penny woke once again to the sound of rocks tapping against her window. She jumped out of bed and slipped on her shoes and a coat—it was getting too cold to go out in just a nightgown anymore.

"Have fun," Karen yawned, rolling over in bed and promptly falling back to sleep. Penny smiled and hurried out the door, down the stairs, and into the night.

Of course, Seaweed was waiting below her window with his arms open. She folded into him effortlessly, and he kissed her forehead. "How are you, baby girl?"

"Right now, I'm great." Penny stepped back and took his hands, gasping involuntarily. "Seaweed, you're freezing!" She gave him a quick once-over and noticed that his jacket was much too thin for the temperature outside.

Seaweed chuckled. "It was dark; guess I grabbed the wrong jacket. Come sit with me a minute, I'll warm up." He sat her down on the grass and held her close, presumably in order to warm up, and she rubbed his hands and arms to get friction going. Laughing low in his throat, he gently held her still.

"That wasn't quite what I had in mind, baby." He leaned down and kissed her, soft at first and rising to passionate. When they finally broke apart, Penny's head was spinning.

"You know," she panted, "I like your way better."

After half an hour of lying in Seaweed's arms, and a few more heady kisses, Penny decided it would be a good idea to head back to her dorm. "I have to go," she whispered sadly.

"Aw, c'mon," he teased her. "I'm not warm yet."

While the thought of staying for a few more hours (or days or weeks) to warm Seaweed up sounded tempting, she beat it down. "Seaweed, someone's going to notice I'm gone."

Seaweed sighed and loosed his hold on her. "All right." They stood up, and he hugged her goodbye.

"I love you," he whispered as he kissed her temple.

She stood on her toes and pressed her lips to his cheek. "I love you too."

\* \* \*

>The next morning, Penny was no sooner up, dressed, and downstairs than an official-looking senior girl tapped her on the shoulder.<p><p>

"Summons to Mother Elena's office," she said grimly, handing Penny a green slip of paper. "Good luck."

Penny's eyes widened as she fell back into an armchair. Mother Elena was Headmistress of Our Lady, and a summons to her office just couldn't mean anything good. \_What did I do?\_ She racked her brain frantically, going over every event of the past month with a fine-toothed combâ€|

She gasped. \_Oh, noâ€| that can't be it. We were too careful! No one ever saw usâ€|\_

\_Except Karen.\_

Penny banished that thought almost as soon as it came into her head. Karen wouldn't tell, not with her own history hitting so close to home. And she couldn't have been lying. There had been too much heart, too much actual feeling in the story she'd told for it not to be true.

But if Karen didn't tell, than who did?

Penny didn't have much time to think about it. If getting summoned to the Headmistress's office on a Saturday morning was bad, keeping said Headmistress waiting was probably worse. She got up out of the armchair and made her way to the administrative building at a snail's pace, hearing the Death March in her head all the way there.

When she arrived at the office, Penny realized that it didn't look nearly as scary as she'd thought it would. The lighting was actually warm, and there was a window overlooking the nearby pine forest. Everything was paneled in oak, and the carpeted floor was a deep crimson. There were crosses everywhere: embroidered on pillows that adorned austere armchairs; patterned on the sun catcher in the window; hanging above the door to the main office. A pinch-faced secretary sat, banging away on a typewriter, at a desk near the window. Penny approached her nervously.

"Can I help you?" the secretary asked in a clipped voice.

"Um," Penny meekly answered, "I'm Penny Pingleton, and I'm here to see Mother Elena."

The secretary didn't look up from her work. "Door's open. She's been expecting you." Penny gulped, turned to the door that seemed, at that moment, to dominate the whole room, and opened it.

The inner office wasn't quite as welcoming as the front room. The walls were hospital white, the lights fluorescent and buzzing, and, instead of a pointy secretary sitting at the desk in the middle of the small room, there was a large, grim old woman in a habit.

"You are Miss Pingleton, correct?" Penny nodded. "Sit." Penny immediately sat in the chair facing Mother Elena's desk.

The nun sat back and steepled her fingers, her eyes scrutinizing Penny. "We received some very disturbing information about you yesterday evening, Penny." The redhead focused all her attention on keeping a straight face; the smallest twinge might give her away, and she didn't even know the charges against her yet.

"As you know," Mother Elena continued, either not noticing Penny's effort or choosing to ignore it, "males over the age of fourteen, whether they are related to a student at Our Lady or not, are not permitted on the grounds. They are a distraction to the learning environment of the young ladies, as well as a danger to their virtue." If the occasion hadn't been so serious, Penny would have giggled. It sounded like Mother Elena was quoting directly from the school charter, if not from a 19th-century novel.

"Last night, a student from your dorm—"you are in Saint Mary Hall, correct?"—"came here to inform me that you were seen on the grounds at some ungodly hour, cavorting with a boy who looked much older than thirteen." Mother Elena looked over her spectacles at Penny. "Are these accusations true? Or should I consider our young informant a liar?"

Penny looked down at her hands. \_Okay, Penny, you have two options. One: you can lie through your teeth, probably get put under some kind of probation, and get into trouble of Biblical proportions if you get caught again. Or, two: Tell the truth, still get into deep trouble, but maybe get a little sympathy.\_

\_Option two.\_

She took a deep breath. "It's true." After a long moment of silence, Penny realized tacking an apology on the end might have been a good idea—but she wasn't really sorry.

Mother Elena sighed. "I was afraid of that. You see, Penny, that means we have to give you the usual punishment for an infraction of that particular rule.

You have the rest of the day to pack. I'll call your mother to come get you in the morning."

## 8. The Upheaval

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><strong>

\*\*Chapter Eight:\*\*

\*\*The Upheaval\*\*

Twenty minutes later, Penny was in her dorm room, numbly folding plaid jumpers and white knee socks and arranging them in her suitcase.

\_You saw this coming, \_she scolded herself. \_You knew this was going to happen, and you let it happen anyway. Now you are going to get in

a world of trouble, and more importantly, so is Seaweed. It was selfish of you to want him to keep comingâ€¦|\_

\_But what else was I supposed to do? \_she thought helplessly. \_Just live without him?\_

\_It would have kept him away from this mess.\_

\_But I would have died!\_

Penny's self-argument ended abruptly when there was a murmuring knock at the door and the rustle of someone trying to slip in unnoticed. She turned silently to face Karen, who, in a surprisingly sympathetic move, began to help her pack.

"So," the blonde said quietly as she rolled a pair of socks, "you're leaving."

"Tonight."

"Get caught with Seaweed?"

Penny was surprised she remembered his name. "More or less."

"I thought so." Suddenly, Karen crossed the room and leaned out into the hallway. "Bring her in, girls." Penny heard heavy footsteps and muffled, angry protests get louder and louder as they came down the hallway and into the dorm room.

Penny's mouth dropped. Between Cheryl and another girl named Phyllis, who were each holding one of her arms, was a very angry looking Judith with a sock tied around her jaw. "Let her go!" Penny ran over to un-gag the girl. As strange as Judith could be at times, she was one of her only allies.

"Wait, P.L. You're gonna want to hear what she has to say before you rush to the rescue." Penny looked at Karen, looked at Judith, and then reluctantly stepped back. "Good. Now, girls, untie her, but \_don't let go.\_ Understand?" The two girls holding Judith nodded, and Cheryl carefully untied the sock with her free hand.

Judith immediately let loose with a string of curse words that would have caused any nuns within a mile to faint. Karen didn't look shocked in the least (which didn't surprise Penny too much, even if her own chin hit the floor). She gestured slightly, and Cheryl and Phyllis both put a hand over Judith's mouth.

"Now, umâ€¦|" Karen looked to Penny for help.

"Judith," she supplied.

"Right." The blonde turned back to her captive and started again. "Now, Judith, I'm sure you know why you're here." Judith only glared at her. "I'll take that as a yes. Is there anything you'd like to say to P.L. here?"

After scowling at Penny for a moment, Judith nodded sharply. Cheryl and Phyllis cautiously moved their hands, and the captured blonde spoke in a low voice.



"I'm not sorry. Not sorry at all. You deserved it, Penny Pingleton. It was coming to you anyway."

Penny furrowed her eyebrows, completely lost. "What are you talking about?"

"What do you think I'm talking about, you idiot?" Judith snapped. "I told."

For a minute, Penny just stared at Judith, reading the lines and angry angles etched into her forehead. Then, suddenly, something clicked.

"You told the headmistress about Seaweed!" she gasped.

"Yes, I did, and I'm not sorry," the blonde repeated savagely.

Judith opened her mouth, ready to begin another monologue, when Penny interrupted. "How did you find out?"

Judith let out a barking laugh. "How could I not? The two of you were so obvious about it!"

"We were careful!" Penny argued, starting to get confused again. "How could you have known?"

"He woke me up! He threw a rock at my window one night a few months agoâ€¦ I suppose he was looking for you. I would have gone downstairs and called the police if I hadn't noticed a girl running out to meet him."

The blood drained from Penny's face as Judith continued. "I watched the two of you every night he came, trying to figure out who that girl was. After a while, I figured out that she was coming and going from your room, Pennyâ€¦"but I thought Karen was the one, not you.

"When I mentioned it to you at lunch the next day, and you got nervous like you didâ€¦ then I had my suspicions. But I couldn't see your face well enough till last night."

"Why?" Penny whispered, after a long silence. "Why would you do that to me, Judith? Iâ€¦ I thought you were my friend."

Judith leaned forward so that her face was less than an inch from Penny's. "And I thought you were a decent girl. I thought you were different from the rest of themâ€¦but I was wrong. You're nothing more than a cheap harlot," she snarled in crescendo.

"Girls, get her out of here," Karen snapped. Phyllis abruptly muffled Judith's imminent tirade with the sock as she and Cheryl dragged her out of the room, leaving Penny to be consumed by shock and sadness.

"Don't worry about her." Karen sat next to Penny on her bed and grinned. "I wouldn't take anyone seriously who used the word 'harlot' in everyday conversation."

Penny laughed weakly. "Thanks, Karen."

"You're welcome. Hey, listen," Karen piped up, pulling a piece of paper and a pen out of her pocket, "if you have any problems when you get back homeâ€¦ just write me here." She scribbled an address on the paper and gave it to Penny. "The nuns invade privacy in every other way they can, but they don't open mail."

Penny smiled a little. Coming from Karen, that was actually kind of touching. "Thank you. I will."

"Good." Karen grinned. "Now, let's get you packed. You are \_so \_lucky to be getting out of this prison."

"Yeah," Penny lied. \_Obviously you haven't met my mother. \_

\* \* \*

>At five o'clock in the afternoon, Penny found herself in the administrative office again, this time with her bags in hand. Apparently it was possible for the wooden doors leading to the headmistress's office to look more intimidating than they had that morning, if only because she now knew what was waiting for her behind them. Expulsion and humiliation were two of them. The third, and the worst, was her mother.<p><p>

Penny took a deep breath. \_You can't wait out here forever.\_ After a few more seconds of hesitation, she went inside.

Mother Elena still sat at her desk, looking as though she hadn't gotten up all day. She didn't even look up at Penny when she entered the room.

Penny glanced over at the closest corner of the room, and saw why the nun's eyes stayed on her desk. If looks could kill, Prudy had probably already murdered Mother Elena at least fifty times over. Of course, it was nothing compared to the choice, freshly sharpened glare she gave Penny.

"Good, Penny, you're here," said Mother Elena, breaking the impossibly long silence. "Why don't you and your mother sit down for a moment before you leave?" Penny glanced nervously over at her mother, who sat down with a blank stare. The young girl followed suit, and the nun turned to her.

"Penny, your mother is already aware of why you are being dismissed, so there is no need to talk about it for the moment." Penny had never felt such a great appreciation for a nun before. "I am sure that your mother will discuss it with you upon leaving, so doing so now would be unnecessary." Mother Elena turned to Prudy and softened somewhat. "Mrs. Pingleton, I realize that this is hardly my business to say," she said quietly, "but you must remember that your daughter is a teenaged girl. I remember being one, and you probably remember being one as well. They are foolish and unthinking creatures at best, and you would do well not to be too hard on her."

"Of course." Prudy's voice came out flat and emotionless, her face still blank. Mother Elena jolted slightly, a little unnerved by her lack of feeling.

"All right, then." The nun quickly regained composure. "That saidâ€¦"

I suppose you are free to go."

Prudy stood up. "Come, Penny," she snapped, already at the door.

Penny timidly followed. Whatever was coming wasn't going to be pleasant.

## 9. The Final Straw

**\*\*Chapter Nine:\*\***

**\*\*The Final Straw\*\***

Penny and Prudy made their way to the entrance, where Prudy's beat-up brown Chevrolet was parked just outside the gates. Wordlessly, Penny boarded the car on the passenger side and turned her body to face the window. She heard her mother get in and start the car, but just continued to stare out at the rolling landscape until darkness fell.

A few hours of driving later, Prudy stopped the car. Penny looked around drowsily and realized that they were in Baltimore, just across town from home. There were no other cars on the street; the only light came from a streetlamp on the sidewalk. It was starting to rain, just a light drizzle.

After a moment, Penny noticed something odd. \_There isn't a stop sign on this cornerâ€|\_

"Penny." Penny turned around and looked at her mother. Prudy's hands gripped the steering wheel so hard her knuckles turned white. She faced forward, her eyes closed, as though she were trying very hard not to look at her daughter. "I have done everything I can to keep you away from that black beau of yours, Penny. I have forbidden you from seeing him; tied you to your bed almost every other week; even resorted to using force so often that every time I raise my hand, you flinch." The rain started falling in fat, hard drops. "I have prayed so hard that something would stick that my rosary is falling apart. I even sent you away to another school, in another city, and yet you found a way around it once again. I have gotten to the point where there is absolutely nothing else I can think to do to get you to see reason."

Though she would think it foolish later, Penny's heart filled with hope. Was her mother finally giving up? Would she let her daughter live and love in peace?

"Get out of the car, Penny."

Penny's stomach lurched. She shook her head. "W-what?"

"I said, get out of the car." Prudy finally turned to look at her daughter, and her eyes were cold. "If you want to ruin your life, fine. Just don't do it under my roof." The rain fell faster and faster, blurring the view from the windows until they looked like melted paintings.

Penny's mind reeled. "Butâ€"but, Mother, Iâ€" "

"You have three days to do whatever you wish to do with your things. After that, I'll throw out anything you leave behind." Prudy's eyes were narrowing. "Either get out of the car, or swear to me on your life that you will never speak to that boy again."

Penny closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her eyes were filling quickly, and she knew she didn't have much time to decide.

After a moment, she opened her eyes. Staring straight ahead, without so much as a defiant word of goodbye, she stepped out of the car and onto the street. Prudy idled for a moment, giving Penny time to grab her suitcase from the trunk and then she was gone.

It didn't hit Penny until that moment, as she watched her mother drive away: she was alone. Homeless. Lost in the rain without even the comfort of a house to go to, a family to worry about her. She shuddered violently, and couldn't tell whether it was from the bracing November rain, the aching aloneness, or both.

Then it dawned on her: she did have a place to go.

It was her only chance.

\* \* \*

><em>Brrrrring.<em>

Seaweed's eyes snapped open at the sound of the telephone ringing next to his bed. He looked at the clock and moaned "who could possibly be calling at one in the morning? He grumbled incoherently to himself for a minute about inconsiderate, possibly drunk friends who were going to wake up the whole house, and reluctantly answered the phone.

"H'lo?"

"Seaweed? Seaweed, it's me."

Seaweed sat straight up in bed. "Penny? Where are you? Is something wrong?" If he'd been fully awake, he would have kicked himself for that; of \_course \_something was wrong. How many girls called their boyfriends at one in the morning just to say hello?

"I'm calling from a payphone onâ€| " She paused. "74th and North Avenue."

"\_Why?"\_

"Because I don't know what else to do!" she blurted. "I got kicked out of Our Lady and my mother told me to get out of the car and I have three days..." She got more frantic with every word, and Seaweed could hear tears working their way into her voice. "Look, can you please just come get me?"

"Of course, baby. I'll be there in just a minute, honey, okay?"

"Okay." She sniffed. "Thank you so much."

"I wouldn't leave you alone." With that, he hung up the phone, threw on his coat, and silently hurried out the door.

\* \* \*

>Penny stood on the corner of 74th and North Avenue, letting herself get rained on as she looked up and down the street. Tears were pouring down her cheeks, and she did nothing to stop them.<p><p>

"Please hurry," she whispered to no one. "Please."

Finally, she saw a pair of headlights approach and stop at the corner. She ran towards them without thinking; she knew very well who they belonged to.

Seaweed stepped out of the car, holding an umbrella, and she folded into him, suddenly deflated.

"Baby, you're soaked," he whispered.

"Y-y-yeah." Her teeth had to pick that moment to start chattering.

"Let's get you home." He quietly guided her to the passenger seat, and got in on the driver's side.

"W-where'd you get the c-c-car?" she asked, more than a little surprised. She knew that, even with Ms. Maybelle's income from hosting the show and the record shop, Seaweed's family didn't have a lot of money.

"We got it a few years ago, for emergencies and holiday grocery shopping only," Seaweed explained. He put his hand on Penny's knee. "I'm pretty sure this qualifies as an emergency."

Penny couldn't even appreciate Seaweed's touch, being too busy shivering and shuddering like a maniac. A worried look passed over his face. "Don't worry, baby, we'll be home soon."

In a few minutes, they pulled up to the record shop. By that time, Penny was shaking so hard all over that she wasn't even sure if she could walk. Seaweed solved that problem immediately: wrapping one arm under her knees and the other around her waist, he lifted her out of the car and carried her inside, up the back stairs to his bedroom.

Seaweed laid her down across his bed, kissed her forehead sweetly, and whispered, "I'll be right back." Penny could only nod and shiver, drawing into herself to keep warm.

A moment later, he came back from the bathroom carrying a towel. Quietly, he sat her up and dried off the parts of her that weren't covered by clothes. Getting rid of the excess water helped, and soon Penny stopped shaking.

"Better?" he asked. Penny noddedâ€"her throat was starting to hurt a little. "Good. Now wait just a second." He got up off the bed and starting rifling through a dresser drawer, eventually coming up with a sweatshirt and a pair of flannel pants. Handing the clothes to

Penny, he whispered, "I'm gonna leave for a minute, and when I come back you need to have these on, all right? We'll get your bag out of the car tomorrow."

"Okay," Penny rasped. Seaweed looked concerned at how thin her voice was, but didn't say anything as he left the room. She carefully peeled off her wet clothes and put on the borrowed ones, inhaling the scent of their owner blissfully.

When she was fully dressed, Seaweed entered the room again. "Are those good?" She nodded. "Great. Now you need to sleep." He tenderly pulled back the covers and let her wriggle in under them. When she was sufficiently covered in blankets, he grabbed the extra pillow and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

He turned around, surprised. "Couch, probably," he yawned.

It hurt to talk, but Penny forced herself to anyway. "I'd get warm faster if you stayed with me."

He chuckled and stretched. "Good point." He silently pulled the covers back again and slipped in next to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Penny turned her face up and closed her eyes, searching, and he kissed her tenderly.

"Sweet dreams, sugar."

"You too."

"Are you gonna tell me what's going on in the morning?"

"Mm-hm."

"All right, then. Good night, baby."

"G'night."

## 10. The Morning

**\*\*Chapter Ten:\*\***

**\*\*The Morning\*\***

Seaweed was up and cooking breakfast bright and early the next morning. He had to admit he was proud of himself—"not many people could scramble an egg, poke sausage with a fork, and cut out biscuits with a soup can at the same time, especially after not touching the stove for eight years.

Hopefully this'll soften Momma up, he thought nervously. Maybelle liked Penny, there was no doubt there; however, finding her in her son's bed at seven o'clock in the morning would probably

"OH MY GOD!"

Seaweed cringed. Oh, man. This won't be pretty.

Maybelle came stomping down the stairs in her bathrobe, curlers, and slippers. Without so much as a word about breakfast, she crossed the room and thumped Seaweed hard on the back of the head.

"Would you mind telling me," Maybelle hissed, "what in the name of Sam Hill your girlfriend is doing IN YOUR BED? You know what? Forget I asked, I know what she's doing there. Let's try again: HOW COULD YOU DO THIS, YOU CRAZY, FOOL-HEADED BOY?"

"Momma, I--"

"You're gonna end up like your cousin Frankie, runnin' from the law, livin' on the streets, babies all over the city and God knows where else!"

"Momma, you've got to listen, Pennyâ€" "

"â€"could very well be pregnant, in which case you'll have to get married and move out, because I am \_not\_â€" "

"Momma! "

"What could you \_possibly\_ \_have to say for yourself? Come on, let's hear it." Maybelle leaned back and folded her arms, glowering at Seaweed under her enormous bombshell of blonde curls.

Very calmly, Seaweed began to explain how Penny had called him late that night, saying that she had been kicked out of school and most likely out of her house; that he had gotten her dried off and into some warm clothes (conveniently leaving out the part about him being the one to actually towel her off); and that he had stayed with her that night to keep her warm, "'cause by now she's probably sick from standing out in the rain that long."

Maybelle sighed and closed her eyes, remaining silent for a long time. After a minute, she spoke. "You swear you're telling the truth, now?"

"I swear, Momma." She looked at him critically. "Have I ever lied to you?"

She took a deep breath. "No," she finally decided. "Doesn't really seem like something you'd do, anyway. I'll go check on Penny; you're right, she's probably sick if she was out in the cold for that long, and with a shock like she hadâ€" she's gonna need some rest." Her eyes flicked to the pan of sausages on the stove. "You keep cooking. She'll need food in her."

Seaweed smiled. "Of course." With that, he turned back to the cooking as his mother climbed back up the stairs.

\* \* \*

>Penny opened her eyes and quickly closed them again with a cracked groan. Her head <em>hurt.</em>

After a moment, she realized that her \_everything\_ \_hurt. Her throat was scratchy, her neck was stiff, and there were dull aches all over her body. \_I probably caught a cold last nightâ€" \_last night.

Suddenly, everything came rushing back--getting kicked out of school, kicked out of her house, Seaweed coming to rescue her--and she couldn't help tearing up.

Wait. Seaweed--where was he? From what she could remember, he had stayed with her last night, and had apparently left sometime earlier. \_Why did he leave? \_She tried to think about it, but her head hurt too much.

The door creaked a short while later--Penny hadn't opened her eyes to check the clock--and she smelled something delicious.

"Hey, sugar."

"Seaweed?" Before she could think, her eyes snapped open and she sat up in bed; something she regretted quickly as a wave of dizziness set in.

"Whoa, easy, girl." Seaweed put the tray down on the bed and steadied her. "You feel sick?" he asked sympathetically.

Penny meant to reply in English, but what came out of her mouth sounded more like a croak. Seaweed winced. "I'll take that as a yes." He reached over and put the tray in her lap. "I thought your throat might be sore, so I just brought eggs. Those are probably easier to swallow than the sausage--do you feel like eating?" Penny shrugged. "You should probably get something in your stomach."

Penny looked down at the plate in front of her. The scrambled eggs \_did \_look fluffy, and they were still warm--she took a little bite.

"Mmmm."

Seaweed grinned. "You like it?" Penny nodded vigorously. "Thanks. I was hoping you might." She raised her eyebrows. "Yeah, I made them. I cooked a lot when Inez was little and my dad wasn't around--haven't done it much lately."

There was a long, comfortable silence while Seaweed felt her forehead and glands, giving a low whistle after each. Finally, he sat down, moved the now-empty tray, and took one of Penny's hands.

"All right, baby, I know you can't talk, but I need you to answer a few questions for me, okay?"

Penny nodded. "Okay--did Our Lady kick you out?"

She nodded again, and he took a deep breath before asking his next question. "Was it my fault?"

She shook her head vehemently. \_It's all \_my \_fault. Don't blame yourself.\_

"Let me rephrase that: did we get caught?" She bit her lip and slowly nodded. He stared at the floor, absently rubbing circles into the back of her hand. "I figured that might have had something to do with it," he said quietly.

Penny squeezed his hand. When he looked up, she gazed into his eyes,



trying to send a message through them into his brain. \_I love you. It's not your fault. I wasn't careful, I was stupid. Please don't be sad.\_

Seaweed smiled weakly, like he had gotten the message but couldn't follow its instructions. "Okay, last question: did your momma kick you out of your house?"

Tears were forming in Penny's eyes; she closed them quickly and bit down hard on her lip to keep it from quivering. Deliberately and cautiously, fearing that any movement could cause the faucet to turn on, she nodded.

For one short moment, nothing happened. Then she let out a tiny sob, and it all came in a flood: Seaweed wrapped her in an almost crushing hug to his chest and whispered, "It's okay, baby girl, you can cry if you need to, I'm right here," so she did, for a long time, without even really knowing why. It could've been a million things, from having no home to having no family to just being plain exhausted from it all, or any combination of the three; but still she cried.

After a while, Seaweed murmured, "Baby, you're gonna make yourself sicker. Calm down a little, I'm right hereâ€| shhâ€|" Sobs turned to sniffles, and then it was over.

"Get some sleep, okay?" She nodded, reaching a hand up to wipe her eyes. He gently grabbed her wrist before she could touch her face.

"Let me do that." With feather-light fingers, he dried the tears on her face, cupping her cheek in his hand when they were all gone. "What good am I," he whispered, "if I can't be your white knight?"

She touched his face tenderly. \_You already are.\_

## 11. The Break In

**\*\*A/N: OH MY GOODNESS.\*\***

**\*\*I am so sorry, guys. I had a serious case of writer's block for the first week or two, but then I just kept putting this off and putting it off... you have my word that it will never take me this long to update again. \*\***

**\*\*And, HG, I guess I'm lucky that this falls right on the end-of-week mark. Now I don't have to deprive myself of chocolate. :)\*\***

**\*\*Chapter Eleven:\*\***

**\*\*The Break-In\*\***

Tracy's hugs were probably the only thing Link looked forward to about the school day. Every morning when she met him at his locker, she'd flash him a huge smile and wrap her arms around his neck (he'd become accustomed to bending over when she hugged him, just to help her out a little), taking a second to cuddle before squeezing and letting go. Her hugs were perfect; more often than not they were

the best part of his day.

That was why his internal alarm bells went off when Tracy drooped depressingly into his arms on Monday morning.

"Hey, little darlin'. Something bothering you?" Link asked, seriously concerned.

She sighed heavily. "Penny called last night."

"She did? I thought they didn't have telephones up at that schoolâ€"

"She got kicked out."

Link stared at Tracy, totally flabbergasted. He knew Penny had a rebellious streak, but he'd never thought of her as the get-expelled-from-Catholic-school type. "\_Why?\_"

"I was going to ask about that, but I got a little distracted when she mentioned that her mother \_booted her out of her house.\_"

"\_Holy\_â€| you've got to be kidding."

"I know, it's \_horrible.\_" Tracy's eyes filled up a little bit, and Link began to panic.

"No, darlin', don't cry, it's okayâ€| what can I do?"

She sniffed and wiped her eyes, looking up at him apologetically. "Sorry. I just feel so bad for herâ€"she did mention that Seaweed needed help getting her stuff out of her room today."

He had to say noâ€"his grade in history was suffering, and he couldn't afford to miss another classâ€|

\* \* \*

>Link knew Tracy didn't melt her eyes at him on purpose. Penny was her best friend, and of course she'd want him to help herâ€| it was just involuntary. <p>However he'd been persuaded, Link was not at all surprised to find himself standing in the alley beside Penny's house, looking up at the fire escape and Seaweed, who was already halfway up.<p>

Seaweed glanced back down and rolled his eyes. "Come \_on\_, get up here. You scared?"

Link scowled. "No. I'm just not sure if this thing will hold both of us."

"Right. Get a move on, cracker boy." With that, he adjusted the folded-up cardboard boxes under his arm and continued up.

Link huffed and uneasily started to climb, falling through the open window at the top. \_Man, I picked the wrong day to wear a suit.\_ He got up and dusted himself off as he realized that Seaweed hadn't seen a thing, being too busy poking around the boxes and photo frames on Penny's vanity.

"So," he asked casually, "what are you gonna get for her?"

Seaweed's brow furrowed. He looked up from the vanity and, with a very straight face, said, "I have no idea."

After a silent, uncomfortable moment of total helplessness, Seaweed suggested, "Wellâ€¦ maybe I'll just get the stuff I've seen her wear at school?"

Link held his hands up. "Don't ask me, man. I know \_nothing \_about girls' clothes."

"That's probably a good thing." Seaweed strode over to the closet and opened it with a flourish, visibly relaxing as he saw that its contents were basically a mass of plaid. "She wears this dress a lotâ€¦ and that skirtâ€¦ and these shirtsâ€¦" He unfolded one of the cardboard boxes he'd brought with him and started stuffing in random articles of clothing. After a while, Link started feeling a little uncomfortable.

"Uhâ€¦ do you want me to help?"

"Yeah, yeah," Seaweed said absentmindedly. "Just get her some underwear or something."

All movement in the room stopped. The two boys turned to look at the dresser where Penny had presumably kept those kinds of things.

"Maybe \_you'd \_better do that," Link muttered, taking the box of skirts.

\* \* \*

>After a long afternoon of throwing dresses, shoes, and unmentionables into boxes and nearly killing themselves trying to carry those boxes down the fire escape, Seaweed and Link finally managed to make it back to the record shop. <p>"Hey, guys!" Tracy greeted the boys cheerfully as they entered the kitchen.<p>

"Heyâ€¦ girls," Link puffed as he put his box down on the floor. Immediately, he sat down and grabbed one of the cookies that Maybelle had just whisked out of the oven, grateful for the break.

"Hey, Trace." Seaweed, who had arms that hurt like all get-out but wasn't about to show it, set his box down on the floor and kissed Penny on the forehead. "How're you doing, baby?"

"I'm a lot better now." She smiled at him. "Have a cookie."

"Don't mind if I do." He sat in the chair between Penny and Tracy and grabbed one, stuffing half of it in his mouth and making Penny laugh.

"Anything interesting happen while we were gone, Trace?" Link asked, starting on his second cookie.

She groaned. "You guys are so lucky you were out! There was a pop quiz in geography fifth period, Principal Perkins gave this boring

assembly about girls breaking the dress code and wearing pants seventh period, and our geometry final is next week."

Seaweed made a face. "Guess we better hit the books, huh?" He turned to Penny. "Don't worry, baby, I'll help you study. You'll catch up in no time."

Penny's eyebrows furrowed. "Seaweed, I can't go back to school," she said, like it was obvious.

"What?" Tracy's mouth dropped. "Penny, you have to come back! I've fallen asleep in civics class for the past five months, but I was awake when Mr. Davis said you can be arrested for not going to school!"

"It's not like they'll notice I'm gone," Penny muttered. "I can't go back."

"Why not?" Seaweed's mind whirled. What is she thinking?

"Iâ€¦ I just can't."

Tracy and Link looked at each other. "Um," Link said quietly, "maybe it's time for us to go."

"Right. I'll see you tomorrow, Seaweedâ€¦ Penny." With that, Tracy and Link left the potential dropout and her boyfriend alone.

Seaweed put his arm around Penny's shoulders. "What's going on, sugar?"

She sighed and buried her face in his shoulder. "I'm the girl who got kicked out of Catholic school, and then out of her own house."

"No, you're not." She looked up at him. "You're Penny Pingleton, the girl who is loved and cared for no matter where she is. People are gonna start rumors, yeah, but you've got me and Tracy and Link to protect you from them. I thought you'd have known that by now."

Penny took a deep breath. "Iâ€¦ I guess you're right. I don't even know why I was worried about that."

Seaweed smiled sympathetically. "It's been a long few days for you, baby." He kissed the top of her head and whispered, "You'll be fine."

## 12. The Return

**\*\*Chapter Twelve:\*\***

**\*\*The Return\*\***

"You ready, baby?" Seaweed squeezed Penny's hand gently.

Penny smiled shakily. "I guess." Truthfully, she had never been less ready to do anything in her life.

For the last half-hour, Seaweed, Tracy and Link had been sitting with

her under the only tree on Patterson Park High School's campus, preparing her for her first day back at public school. Tracy had given her a homemade, freshly frosted cinnamon roll and told her everything was going to be just fine; Seaweed had held her hand and stroked it reassuringly, even when people stared; and even Link had offered his services as temporary bodyguard, even though she knew he wouldn't actually fight anyone. To be honest, part of her was kind of enjoying the attention—but a much larger part was scared stiff.

Seaweed grinned. "Good." He stood up and offered Penny his hand, which she took gladly. Tracy and Link stood up, too, and the four of them headed for the entrance.

Before they went through the doors of the school, Seaweed wrapped Penny in a hug and whispered in her ear, "Listen, baby, if you have any problems today, I want you to come straight to me. Okay?"

"I'll be fine," Penny murmured, even though she didn't quite believe it.

"Still. If anyone bothers you, just come find me, all right?"

She sighed. "All right." She gave him a quick peck on the lips. "I love you."

"Love you too, sugar."

And so they walked in together, his arm around her shoulders, to face an ugly world with the tiniest bit of beauty surrounding them.

\* \* \*

><p>They had to split up at homeroom; Tracy and Penny were in a different first period than Seaweed. Mr. Jennings, the geometry teacher, looked surprised when he read Penny's name off of the roll call list, but didn't say anything about it, even as a few students turned around to look at her. She blushed a little, and Tracy gave her a quick "it's okay" look.<p>

Over the course of the next class period, a total of two people turned in their seats to stare thoughtfully at Penny. She wasn't really surprised at the small number; due to her chronic shyness, not many people knew her name. \_They probably just thought it was weird that they hadn't seen me with Tracy,\_ she thought. \_It's not like anyone \_really \_noticed I was gone. \_She sighed a little with relief. Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as she thought.

The bell rang, ending first period. Penny gathered her things and was about to head to her next class when she heard the \_clickclickclick \_of high heels running to catch up with her.

"Penny!" The clicking slowed as Tammy finally caught up with her. "It's Penny, right?"

"Um—| yeah."

"How are you?" Penny looked blankly at her. She and Tammy had never actually spoken to the point where they could make small talk like old friends. "I just haven't seen you at the station in a while," the

perky girl explained.

"Oh, right." Penny remembered how she used to wait for Seaweed in the audience while he danced on Corny's show. Tammy had always waved at her before they all left the set, even though they'd never actually spoken.

"Where were you? I heard a couple of rumors, but they were all pretty crazy."

Penny gulped. \_Rumors?\_ "Ah," she started carefully, "I justâ€¦ went to a different school for a little while."

Tammy's face brightened. "Oh, like an exchange program, right?"

"Yeah, something like that." Penny smiled blandly, trying to convince Tammy not to inquire further.

"Groovy! I was just wondering where you disappeared to." Tammy beamed. "Glad you're back!"

"Thanks." The blonde bounced away, leaving Penny utterly confused by the sudden attention.

\* \* \*

><p>"â€¦ so, yeah, she didn't go back to the big house again. It was just an exchange deal!" <p>

Amber had been listening to Tammy's little dirt-dish halfheartedly for the past few minutes, but that last sentence made something pop in her brain. "Are you talking about Tracy's scrawny little redhead friend?"

Tammy gave her a look. "Her name is Penny, Amber."

"Whatever." Amber glanced across the cafeteria at the table where the redhead in question was sitting with Tracy (the name prompted a tigress-like angry growl in her head), Link (ouch; that one still stung a little), and a few of the Council kids, most of them black. The school didn't segregate the lunch tables, obviously, but differences in personality and social standing tended to separate the white Council members from the black anyway.

Amber, not for the first time, caught herself staring a little too long at one of the recently-mixed-in Council boys (what was his name? Duane or something), and made herself turn away. \_Bad girl, Amber.\_ She didn't have time to focus on that, anyway. Suddenly, she realized what had made Tammy's last comment so strange.

"Tammy," she said, catching the blonde midsentence. "If she exchanged schools, why wasn't there a new student \_here\_?"

Tammy frowned. "What does \_that\_ have to do with anything?"

"In order for it to be an exchange, two students have to go to different schools, not just one."

Tammy thought for a minute, and then shrugged. "Maybe someone from

Penny's new school went to Summerton High?" Some of the Council girls actually took this seriously. Amber just rolled her eyes, not bothering to try to explain further.

Instead, she looked back over at Tracy's table. Link had apparently just said something stupid, and everyone was laughingâ€| except Penny. She giggled, but she still looked nervous and uptightâ€"not like a girl who just returned from a refreshing jaunt at a new school. Normally, Amber wouldn't even care about something like that; but this time, however indirectly, her ex-boyfriend was involved, and she had to find out what was going on.

She made a mental note to get the dirt on Penny Pingleton. Feeling slightly satisfied, she ate a small forkful of salad and rejoined the conversation.

### 13. The Mission

**\*\*A/N: Ta daaa! I'm baaack! :) My 900-point project is now completely finished, and the school year is almost over--but not before finals. :P I'm so glad that I got to put up this chapter, but it might be the last for a little while. It definitely won't be as long as this last hiatus.\*\***

**\*\*Chapter Thirteen:\*\***

**\*\*The Mission\*\***

The bell sounded, signaling that the \_Corny Collins Show \_was off the air for the afternoon, and Corny's "TV smile" immediately reverted to a straight line in the middle of his face. "All right, everybody, good job today. Be back here a little early tomorrow if you can; I want to work on some new steps." Amber and a few others groanedâ€"more time for rehearsal before the show meant less time for hair and makeup.

Corny just rolled his eyes and headed off the set, stopping Amber right before he left. "Listen, I'm scheduling these early shows for your benefit. Make the most of them; your Chicken needs work."

"Right," Amber replied, using as much disdain as she could muster. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that her position on the show was in peril, but she had different things on her mind at the moment.

For one thing, there was the fact that Penny, Tracy, Link, and the boy Penny was dating (Kelp or something strange like that) were all headed for the door.

"I'll be there, Corny, okay?" The man looked like he was going to say something, but he just shook his head and grumbled something about ungrateful kids before leaving. Amber never took her eyes off the door on the other side of the studio. Thankfully, the two couples hadn't left; they were talking about potential plans for the afternoon. As inconspicuously as she could, Amber made her way over to where her things were stacked (she had left everything next to that door purely by coincidenceâ€"\_yeah, right\_") and silently began to pack her bag.

"Do you want to stop at the drugstore for a soda?" Tracy suggested in that annoying soprano of hers.

"Nah, we did that last week, remember?" That was Penny's boyfriend, putting his arm around her bony shoulders. "Hey, we just got some new 45's in at the record shop. Y'all wanna come over and check 'em out?"

Tracy grinned annoyingly. "Sounds groovy!"

The black boy turned to Penny and smiled. "Sound good to you, baby?"

"It sounds great, Seaweed." Amber huffed inwardly. \_Seaweed, Kelp, whatever. I was close.\_

"Okay, then; to my house it is." The four of them grabbed their things and made a beeline for the door. Link pecked Tracy on the cheek while he held the door open for her, and suddenly Amber realized she didn't care.

She shook that sudden revelation aside to deal with later, and instead tried to fill her mind with scenes from every stupid spy movie Link had made her sit through while they were together. She needed all the help she could get.

After following her targets for five blocks, Amber finally had to admit that espionage was a lot harder than those actors made it look. Her feet hurt (she made a mental note to never wear high heels anywhere that required a lot of walking), the crowds were getting thicker, and it was getting increasingly harder to keep close enough that she could follow the foursome, but far enough away that \_they \_couldn't see \_her.\_

There was also the fact that they were starting to get close to North Avenue. Amber had never been north of First Street before, mostly because she knew her mother would kill her if she did. But (and she didn't like admitting this) part of it was she was scared. She'd heard about things that happened on North Avenue, and they weren't things that she would like to get involved in.

She slowed a little, considering her options. She could turn back and be safe, or go on to North Avenue, very possibly get shot (if not by some crazy guy in a beat-up Chevy, then by her mother), and get some dirt on Tracy Turnblad's best friend.

She huffed and kept walking.

Amber noticed that, the closer Seaweed and Tracy got to North Avenue, the more fist bumps and friendly slaps on the back they received from random people. These people usually said hello to Penny and Link, but those greetings were less exuberant, probably due more to Penny's shyness and Link's over-eagerness to fit in than anything else.

She also noted that, the closer \_she \_got to North Avenue, the more awkward stares and even outright scowls she got from people. She wondered how hard it would be to get a decent taxi around here, or if she would have to resort to walking back home.



After a few more blocks, Amber saw her targets going into a building with a neon sign on top that read "Motormouth Records". \_Finally\_, she thought. \_Ugh, I \_have \_to get these shoes off. \_She found a window around the side of the building, took her shoes off, and crouched down as carefully as she could while still being able to see in.

Nothing interesting happened during the first few minutes: Seaweed put on a 45, everybody danced. There was kissing, but not enough to suggest a serious scandal.

Amber sighed. \_I should just go home before it gets dark. \_She stood up, turned around, and found herself face to face with a black boy who looked very confused. He seemed familiar; before she could stop herself, Amber felt her cheeks flushing. "Um, I can explain."

He grinned, inexplicably making her heart lurch. "No need. You wanna go in and join the party, right?"

"Excuse me?" Now \_Amber \_was confused, in more ways than one.

"You want to go in there and dance with them, but you've never been to this side of town."

"How did you know that?"

The boy looked down at her pristine yellow dress, white gloves, and blistered feet. "Lucky guess."

Amber blushed again, infuriatingly. "Umâ€¦"

"Well, today is your lucky day," the boy continued, holding out his hand, "because today, you have Duane Rivers to escort you into this fine soirÃ©e."

Duane took her nervous look at his hand as apprehension about going into the party. "Oh, come on, it won't be that bad. We don't bite."

Suddenly, Amber got a brilliantâ€"if slightly manipulativeâ€"idea. "Oh, I know most of them from the showâ€"and you, too, now that I think of it," she said demurely. "But I don't know the girl with the red hair very well. Her name's Penny, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah. Don't worry about her, she's one of the sweetest girls you'll meet. Quiet, and a little on the spastic side, but still friendly as she could be." He grinned.

"Does she hang out here every day?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, pretty much. Lately she's been staying over, too. I don't know what happened, but for Seaweed's sake I hope her momma doesn't find out where he lives."

Amber suppressed a smile. \_So \_that's \_what's going on with Miss Penny.\_

Duane suddenly looked shocked. "Um, I really shouldn't have told you that. Do me a favor and keep it quiet, you dig?"

"Oh, I most certainly will." \_Not. \_Amber smiled sweetly at him. "I'm sorry, but I really do need to get home. I'll catch you later, okay?"

Duane beamed. "You want me to walk you?"

"No, I think I'll be fine." \_Like Mother won't flip her wig already. If I brought \_you \_home, she'd really blow her top. \_She patted him on the shoulder (pretending that she didn't \_really, really \_enjoy touching his bicep) and walked home as briskly as she could without breaking an ankle. There was no way she could spread this choice dirt if she got shot in this dump.

## 14. The Gossip

**\*\*Chapter Fourteen:\*\***

**\*\*The Gossip\*\***

"Hey, Seaweed."

"Hey, Duane." Seaweed was used to walking to school with Duane; they'd been doing it every day of their educational lives, since Maybelle and Duane's mom had decided that their kids needed buddies to walk the two blocks to North Avenue Elementary School. He was not, however, used to Duane being this jumpy. His eyes darted around nervously, and his left hand kept twitching every minute or so.

"So, uh, where's Penny?"

"She went with Tracy earlier." The two girls had to go to an early-morning geometry tutoring session every Thursday morning now, because they had respectively missed or slept through so many classes this year. "Why?"

"Just keep an eye on her today, okay?"

Now Seaweed was beginning to get suspicious. "Duane, what happened?"

"I think now would be a good time to remind you that we've been best friends since kindergarten."

"Duane, \_what did you do?\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"All right, class, we've got two minutes left; does anyone have a question about the Pythagorean Theorem?" Just as Mr. Scalera turned to face his review studentsâ€"and Penny was thinking that she couldn't be more bored if she triedâ€"Seaweed burst through the door, his eyes wild. He saw Penny and immediately turned to the teacher.<p>

"Mr. Scalera? If you don't mind, I \_really \_need to borrow Penny for a minute." The geometry teacher's eyes narrowed, but he waved his hand and Seaweed ran to grab Penny.

"Seaweed, what is it?" He didn't answer as they barreled out of the

room and down the hallway. Finally, they stopped outside a broom closet, and Seaweed pushed her in, closing the door behind them.

"Seaweed, \_what \_is going on?" Penny was starting to get frustrated.

"Oh, don't ask me," Seaweed snapped. "Talk to Duane about it. He'll tell you \_everything\_. He's good at that."

"Shut up," Penny heard Duane bark back. "It was an accident!"

"Accident, myâ€"

"Does anyone want to tell me what's going on here?" Penny interrupted.

Seaweed glared at Duane, who started to look nervous. "Penny, I just want to ask you to give me a five-second head start after I tell you this."

\_That doesn't sound good. \_"Duane, you know I'd never try to fight you."

Duane pointed at Seaweed. "I mean from \_him.\_"

Penny nodded, feeling uneasy. "Okay."

"Goodâ€|. So, uh, I guess I should start explaining now."

"That would be nice."

Duane took a deep breath. "I, uh, ran into Amber at the record shop yesterday."

"What was she doing there?"

"Beats me. She was hanging out by the window, watching y'all dance." Just then, Seaweed glared at him again, and he quickly got back to what he'd been saying. "Anyway, we started talking, and Iâ€| kind of told her some stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" Penny was starting to see where this was going.

"I told her thatâ€|" Duane mumbled the rest of his answer so quietly Penny couldn't understand him.

"What was that?"

"I said I told her that you were staying at Seaweed's."

Penny stopped breathing. Her heart was pounding, going a million miles a second; she suddenly had the sensation that she was on the highway and all the other cars were speeding along around her while her engine stalled.

"Ohâ€| my..."

Seaweed whacked Duane sharply upside the head. "She's freaking out!"

"Man, I'm sorry. I justâ€"

"Just cut out, all right? I'll calm her down." Seaweed told him, sounding completely disgusted.

Duane didn't say anything, only left the closet in silence. Finally, it was just Seaweed and Penny, alone with a couple of mops.

"Baby girl?" he asked softly. "You all right?"

Penny concentrated on breathing. When she didn't say anything, Seaweed got down on the floor next to her (had she collapsed? She hadn't noticed) and put his arm around her.

"Hey, listen. I can't tell if you're looking at me, 'cause it's dark in here, so just pay attention, you dig?" She moved closer to him, and his voice softened a little. "Duane? Yeah, he's an idiot, and he's a sucker for anything in a skirt, but he's honestly sorry. Don't get me wrong, I'm still gonna smack him around a little later, but don't be mad at him for too long, okay?"

"I'm not mad!" she blurted suddenly, making him jump. "I'm worried. Seaweed, I'm the school slut now! What am I supposed to do?" Her voice started to get shrill, another unfortunate trait she'd gotten from her mother.

If Seaweed had been shocked earlier, he was floored now. He had never in all the time he'd known Penny heard her use the word slut. Girls all over the school said it, and so did some of the guys, but Seaweed had grown up around women, and he knew that it was a bad word, the kind you never used unless you were drunk and didn't know what you were saying. "No, you're not. Penny, don't you even think that for a minute, you got that? You haven't done anything wrong."

"But he told Amber," she moaned.

"So?"

"So everyone's going to think I'mâ€| that we'reâ€|."

"Since when does what everyone thinks matter?" Seaweed asked. "We've gotten through this before."

"But that's the thing, Seaweed! This isn't the same thing we've done before. Before, it was just that people didn't like us being together at all, but now people either don't care or just avoid us. This is completely different! It's a reputation, not a relationship! No matter how many people I tell that it's all a lie, they'll just keep believing it until they start thinking nothing else was ever trueâ€|" Penny started to get hysterical. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a sarcastic voice whispered, "Gee, when was the last time you had a cow?"

Seaweed just held her, desperately trying to think of something to say that would make everything all right again, but coming up short. "I'm so sorry, baby," he whispered. "So, so sorry."

Suddenly, they heard a bell ring outside the door, and the sounds of pre-first-period chaos going on outside: footsteps, talking, lockers slamming.

"You wanna ignore that for a little while?" Seaweed asked quietly.

"Just until everyone's out of the hallway."

They sat in silence until the late bell rang and the people who were too hip to get to class on time finally left the hall. Then they got up and left the broom closet.

Seaweed gave Penny a quick, chaste kiss on the lips, completely dropping his usual passion. "See you at lunch?"

"Okay." Penny turned and walked back to Geometry, her first class.

For the first time, she was relieved that she and Seaweed had different first periods.

\* \* \*

><p>"I just thought she was such a nice girlâ€|"<p>

"I guess those are the ones you have to watch."

"I hear she's already"â€"now in hushed tonesâ€""P.G." Gasps flew around the table.

Penny tried to walk by without looking at any of them, but she could feel their eyes on her as she got her mystery meat, her mashed potatoes, and her roll. Even the cafeteria ladies were skirting around her like she was some kind of leper. She closed her eyes for a moment, and then turned around to look for her friends.

Nothing could have prepared her for what happened next.

\_Everyone \_was staring at her. The entire cafeteria had fallen silent. They were scrutinizing her, hoping for some outward manifestation of her newly and unduly received reputation.

Penny tried to look away, but somehow she managed to glance at Amber. She had a smug little smile on her face, taking a little private pride in her work.

Suddenly, Penny dropped her tray, and the noise echoed through the silent cafeteria.

She ran. Out the door to the courtyard, which was already covered in a thin layer of frost, and around the corner, off campus. She could vaguely hear voices calling her name, but she didn't hear footsteps running after her, so she just kept running, not even thinking of the frost under her feet, just hearing the rhythm they made as they pounded the pavement. \_Gotta go, gotta go, gotta go. \_

She didn't stop running until she got back to the record shop.

## 15. The Decision

**\*\*A/N:** Hey, guys! This is probably my last update for a while, since I'm visiting family and EVERYONE who is related to me on my dad's side is hopelessly technologically primitive. :P **\*\***

**\*\*Chapter Fifteen:\*\***

**\*\*The Decision\*\***

Penny took her time getting into the record shop. She knew Maybelle would be homeâ€”co-hosting \_The Corny Collins Show \_was her only job outside the storeâ€”and she wondered if just disappearing for a little while, maybe to go to the movies or the park, wouldn't be a better alternative to going inside and having to explain why she was there.

She checked her pockets. After buying her uneaten lunch, she didn't have enough money left with her to get a bag of popcorn, let alone actually see a movie; and besides, it was cold out. Finally, she just took a deep breath and went in, wincing when the bell on the door jingled.

Naturally, Maybelle came running in from the back. "Welcome to Motormouth Records. We'll supply you with tunes, and you'll come back realâ€”" Suddenly, it seemed to register that Penny was standing in front of her. "Well, honey, what are you doing here? Kids stopped going home for lunch years ago. Where's Seaweed? Is he here, too?" Maybelle looked around Penny, as if Seaweed might be behind her.

"No."

It amazed Penny how Maybelle knew to look concerned from just that one syllable. \_Her \_mother had never been able to do that. "What's wrong, sugar? Something happen at school?"

Penny tried to think of something to say that would convey the enormity of the situation at hand, but all she could come up with was, "Yes, ma'am."

"Well, come on in and have some lunch, and you can talk to me about it," Maybelle said warmly as she steered Penny into the back of the record shop. "No one comes here around lunchtime anyway."

In a few minutes, Penny was settled in at the kitchen table with a bowl of chicken soup, stirring it aimlessly and watching the little bits of chicken and rice spin around. Maybelle spooned some soup out for herself, and then sat down across from Penny.

"All right, now. What's got you so worked up that you ran out of school in the middle of the day?"

Penny remained silent for a long time. "Amberâ€” she found out." When Maybelle looked confused, she clarified a little. "She found out that I'm staying here."

Maybelle raised her eyebrows, but that was the extent of her shock. "How?"

"Iâ€¦ I don't know." There was no need to drag Duane into this. "But she told the whole school, and it just got bigger and bigger until the whole thing was lies. Everyone thinks I'mâ€¦ that Seaweed and Iâ€¦" She couldn't bring herself to say it to Maybelle, even though she was the hippest adult Penny knew. "There's even a rumor going around that I'm pregnant."

Maybelle just shook her head. "Honey, I am so sorry that happened to you." She reached out and took Penny's hand. "It's an awful thing for people to think you're something you're not, especially at your age."

Penny could hear the "but" in her voice. "You knew this was going to happen all along, didn't you?"

"I can't say I thought it wouldn't, sweetheart. This kind of news travels fast, even when you try to keep it a secret." She sighed. "Would it make things easier for you to move in with the Turnblads? I know they'd love to have you."

"I'll think about it."

"All right, honey." Maybelle smiled sympathetically. "Now, eat your soup. You're gonna help me in the record shop today."

"Really?"

"You kidding? Have you seen how crowded this place is after lunch? With all these people, you're not gonna be able to go back to school today."

Penny grinned. "Thanks, Miss Maybelle."

"I don't know what you're grinning about. This place is packed in the afternoons." Maybelle winked and left Penny alone with her soup.

\* \* \*

><p>Amber was completely satisfied. Her rumor had worked its course: Penny Pingleton was completely humiliatedâ€"in fact, the skinny redhead hadn't been to school since yesterday, when she'd run out of the cafeteria--thus humiliating Tracy Turnblad by association. It was <em>perfect.</em> She was just headed home to celebrate when two familiar figures stepped out in front of her from an alley.

"Tracy, Link. Howâ€¦ nice to see you."

"Cut the crap, Amber," Link snapped.

"Link!"

"Not the time, Trace." He turned back to Amber. "Why the hell did you do that?"

\_I don't think I've ever seen him this angry!\_ Link was starting to scare her a little. Still, she managed to keep her cool. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she demurred, trying to get past them.

"You know perfectly well what you did, Amber." Now Tracy was starting in on her. "Why did you say all that stuff about Penny?"

"I didn't say all of it," she snapped back without thinking. "It just snowballed, okay? Now get out of my way." She tried to push past them, but to her shock, Tracy pushed back.

"You'd better go tell everyone it's not true."

"Why? Isn't she living with him?"

"Is it really any of your business whether she is or not? Have you ever considered that maybe you don't know everything about her? Maybe she has a really good reason for being there."

"Does she?"

"Why would I tell you?"

"I'm not calling off anything unless I have a good reason to." Finally, Amber just stepped onto the street and walked around them. Neither followed, but Tracy called after her.

"I'll set you up with Duane."

Amber stopped and turned around right in the middle of the sidewalk. "What?"

"I said, I'll set you up with Duane."

Link looked confused. "Uh, Trace, are you sure youâ€" "

"Oh, please, Link. You can't say you haven't seen the way she stares at him in the cafeteria." To Amber, she said, "I'll set you up with him if you tell everyone the rumors going around about Penny aren't true. He likes you too, you know."

Amber's stomach flopped over at the thought of going out on a date with Duane; outwardly, she looked shocked. "If you think that I would ever in my life go out on a date with a Negro, you are sadly mistaken." She turned on her heel and stalked off.

In the back of her mind, she wondered if she might have missed out on something important.

## 16. The Plan

A/N: Sorry this took me so long, guys

**\*\*A/N: Sorry this took me so long, guys! I've been on a crazy vacation for the past month, and I haven't really had time to sit down and type until now. I hope this was worth the wait!\*\***

**\*\*Chapter Sixteen:\*\***

**\*\*The Plan\*\***

"This bites."



"Don't I know it, cracker boy."

Link, Seaweed, and Tracy were, once again, sitting around the kitchen table in the back of the record shop. This time, however, there was no food sitting out, not even a mug of hot chocolate to warm them from the snow that now covered Baltimore. No one felt like eating.

Tracy sighed. "I just wish she would come \_out.\_ It would be so much easier to prove Amber's lying if Penny was walking around at school."

"We'll figure something out," Seaweed said confidently. "All we've gotta do is get her out of that room, and then we can crack this thing." Penny hadn't left the record shop in days; Seaweed had tried to talk to her, but she had just completely shut herself off. Even though he was trying to play it cool, Seaweed's thoughts were a mess. \_This is really bad. She's never just not responded beforeâ€|\_

"I have a solution for you," a voice whispered behind them.

They turned around, startled. Penny was standing there, her hair limp, her eyes red and bloodshot, and the rest of her drooping like a flower in a drought. "I can move in with Tracy," she said, her voice barely audible. "Then this whole thing could be over with."

Seaweed froze. He looked at Tracy and she shook her head almost imperceptibly. She hadn't said anything to Penny about moving in with herâ€"and, more importantly, away from him.

Penny continued, seeming not to notice. "If I lie low for a little while, then someone else will get arrested, or drop outâ€| or get pregnant for real. Not that I want any of that stuff to happen," she added quickly, "but eventually, I'll be yesterday's news." She looked at Tracy. "Is it okay if Iâ€|"

"Of course," Tracy replied hesitantly. But don't you think you should think about it for a little longer?"

"Thanks."

Looking a little taken aback by Penny's monosyllabic response, Tracy slowly stood up. "I guess Link and I should go," she said, grabbing Link's arm. "Bye, Seaweed." She took a long look at her friend. "Bye, Penny."

Link nodded at Seaweed and said, "See you later, man."

And they were gone.

Seaweed stared hard at Penny, but she wouldn't look at him. There was a long, horribly uncomfortable silence. He would have said something, anything, just to break the quiet, but he wanted her to be the first to speak.

Finally she whispered, "Please don't be angry."

"I'm not angry, Penny." \_I'm hurt, I'm confused, but I'm not angry.\_

She sighed. "Good. I can't tell you how much easier this will all be for me knowing your okay with it."

\_I never said I was okay with it. \_

Another uncomfortable silence. Penny looked nervous; Seaweed just brooded.

"You know this isn't your fault, right?" she finally blurted. "You didn't do anything. I just think it would be easier on both of us if I wasn't sleeping in your bed."

Seaweed winced. He had to admit that she wasn't exaggerating on that pointâ€"she \_was\_ sleeping in his bedâ€"but he had been sleeping on the couch after that first night by order of his mother. Not to say that he didn't sneak upstairs every so often, of course. But they'd never done anything really serious; he wasn't going to do anything like that with her until he knew she was completely ready, and she knew that. So what was she getting upset about?

He paused for a moment, let her words sink in. After a few minutes, he said very quietly, "If you think it'll work, it's fine with me."

She sighed and smiled with relief, and he stood, bringing her up with him. As he leaned in to give her a kiss, she surprised him by pushing him away. When he looked confused, she took a deep breath. "That's the other thing, Seaweed. I think it would be better if we justâ€| didn't for a while. At least, not in public, until thisâ€| thingâ€| dies out."

Once, when Seaweed was in the third grade, a kid named Brick who got his name from his thick skull had headbutted him in the stomach. This moment felt a lot like that. "What?"

He watched as Penny's eyes filled up with tears. "I'm so sorry, Seaweed," she said, her voice cracking on the last syllable. "This hurts me, too. You have no idea how much. But it's never gonna go away if we don'tâ€"

"If we don't \_what?\_" Seaweed snapped. "If we don't do something neither of us wants to do, just to make people think something different about us? If we don't split up because of something people are saying that the people who care about you \_know\_ \_isn't\_ true? When did you become so concerned with other people? It never used to bother you before!"

He could see her eyes welling over, but he didn't want to do anything about it. "Seaweed, you don't understand. This is so, so different from everything else we've ever dealt with. If you'd just try to listenâ€"

"Why is it so different?" He was shouting now. "Why is this so different from anything else? \_Why\_ can't we get through this together?\_"

Suddenly, he realized that he was scaring her. "Penny, Iâ€"

"I'll just go pack," she said softly, trying not to look at him. He was sure he could see a tear rolling down her cheek, but he couldn't

do anything about it now. She turned slowly and went up the stairs. Seaweed just stared after her, horrified at what they'd just done, not even sure it really happened.

Maybelle chose that second to walk in the door. In the grand tradition of mothers everywhere, she took one look at his face and said, "Uh-oh. What happened?"

"Penny's moving in with Tracy." \_I really don't need to talk about this right now. \_He walked around his mother and straight through the record shop, heading out the door.

## 17. The Separation

**\*\*A/N: Hey, guys.\*\***

**\*\*Sorry for the wait! I've got school coming up, and I had to finish this big summer reading project that I suspect is going to be a huge percentage of my grade in English. I feel bad, not updating sooner, but I promise a virtual brownie to anyone who's willing to forgive me. :) \*\***

**\*\*Chapter Seventeen:\*\***

**\*\*The Separation\*\***

Penny sat down quietly, across the cafeteria from where she normally sat with Seaweed. She was alone, of course; she knew that most of the people who sat at her normal lunch table would side with Seaweed, since they'd been his friends longer than she'd even known him. Besides, she wanted to be alone. There was a horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach, a kind of dread and sorrow mixed together, and she wanted solitude to wallow in it.

She'd moved out of the record shop the day before; Inez and Maybelle had said goodbye, but Seaweed didn't even come downstairs. Mrs. Turnblad had been more than happy to have her—she'd made lasagna, Penny's favorite food, for dinner in honor of the occasion. Tracy had acted like she was happy, too, but Penny could see that her friend was nervous and worried about her.

\_Well, she has no reason to be worried, \_Penny thought as she picked at her food. \_I am perfectly fine, thank you very much. \_

"Hey, Penny," she heard a quiet voice say. She looked up abruptly, and there was Tracy.

"Hey." She couldn't help the little note of surprise in her voice. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Penny had thought that Tracy would sit with Seaweed, and it would serve Penny right if she had. But there she was.

Tracy sat down and started eating. Penny just stared at her lunch tray.

Finally, Tracy spoke. "How are you?"

Penny smiled weakly. "I'm okay." She was, sort of. She hadn't noticed anyone staring at her today, and that was an improvement for

sure.

Suddenly, something occurred to her. "Where's Link?"

Tracy focused on her food. "Um, he's over with Seaweed." Penny could tell she was trying to keep her voice nonchalant, but that only made her sadder.

"Why aren't you over there with him?"

Tracy looked up, taken aback. "You want me to leave?"

"No, no," Penny said hurriedly. "It's justâ€¦ I don't want to be the reason you guys separate."

Tracy smiled. "It's okay, Penny. We'll still see each other after school; we're going to the diner after the show today. Do you want to come with us?"

Penny appreciated that Tracy was trying to be nice, but she knew that if she went, she would be a third wheel. "Thanks, Tracy, but I think I'm just gonna go back to your house after school."

Tracy frowned. "You aren't gonna come to theâ€¦ oh. Right." It seemed like it was finally dawning on Tracy that Penny did not want to see Seaweed unless it was absolutely necessary, and rehearsal for the show didn't fall under that category. She smiled a little awkwardly. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Penny moved some salad around on her tray. "Maybe I'll get an early start on my homework."

"Okay, if that's what you want to do, I guess." Tracy sounded disbelieving and a little shocked. The words "early start" and "homework" had never come out of Penny's mouth in the same sentence.

Suddenly, the lunch bell rang. Tracy stood up. "Well, I guess I'll see you in Spanish."

"Yeah." Penny got up and dumped her uneaten lunch in the garbage.

This was going to be a \_long\_ week.

\* \* \*

><p>"I can't stand this, man."<p>

"I know."

"No, you don't." Seaweed started pacing around the living room in the back of the record shop. "You and Tracy don't \_have \_this kind of crap happen to you."

Link had been sitting on the couch for about fifteen minutes now, watching Seaweed pace and listening to him talk about Penny. \_If he wasn't one of my good friends, \_he thought, \_I would have left by now.\_

"Why is she suddenly so caught up in what everybody else thinks? It was obviously never a problem before all this with her mom. Now she's the queen of wanting people's approval for \_everything\_â€¦ I bet she'll be asking Amber what color plaid she should wear to school before we know it."

Link waited patiently, albeit a little awkwardly. \_He doesn't really feel like that,\_ he thought.

Seaweed stopped pacing. "I don't really feel like that," he groaned, flopping down on the couch. "What am I saying?"

"You're just confused. You have no idea what you're feeling, so you just chose to direct your anger and confusion at Penny rather than dig down deep and figure out what your real thoughts are."

Seaweed looked at him incredulously. "When did \_you\_ get in touch with your emotions?"

Link felt a little sheepish. "Tracy's been tutoring me in psychology," he said defensively. "She's actually really good at it."

Seaweed shook his head, obviously trying to get back to his real problems. "I just don't know what to do. Did she want to leave me, or did she just want everybody off her back?"

"You know Penny better than I do," Link said simply.

Seaweed thought for a minute. "She probably just wanted to catch a break," he finally sighed. "She had a lot of tough stuff going on, and she needed to get away from it all." He looked at Link. "Right?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because apparently you're a shrink now."

Link huffed. "It sounds like something Tracy would say, I'll give you that."

"All right, then." Seaweed stood up. "You want something to eat? I think Momma's starting dinner in just a minute."

"Nah, I gotta get home. My old man's probably wondering where I am." He got up and clapped Seaweed on the shoulder. "Hang in there, man."

"Thanks."

\* \* \*

><p>Penny sat down facing away from Seaweed's normal table, just like she'd been doing for the past four days. She had just picked up her fork, ready to start tearing her salad into small pieces, when she looked up and <em>there he was.<em>

He wasn't standing in front of her; not really. He was just waiting in the lunch line. But she wondered when he looked up, too, if he had been looking for her in the back of his mind, just like she had

been.

She tried to send him a message with her eyes. \_I'm sorry. Please forgive me. This will all be better soon, I promise. \_

She didn't think it got all the way over to him, though, because he looked down after a split second, paid for his food, and walked away without saying a word.

## 18. The Letters

**\*\*A/N: OH MY AEROSOL.\*\***

**\*\*I am so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so sorry it took me this long to update, guys. I'm not even going to OFFER an excuse, because there isn't one, other than severe writer's block and, obviously, a total disregard for my readers, because I haven't updated since AUGUST. I didn't even realize that until just now when I was typing up this chapter, and it was completely mortifying. I feel terrible. Big, big props to anyone who still reads this story after having to wait this long. \*\***

**\*\*Also, on another note, I just re-found my Hairspray DVD! Evil sibling took it... grr. But I have it again, so it's all good.\*\***

**\*\*Okay, I've made you wait long enough for this. Go to the chapter!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Eighteen:<p>

**\*\*The Letters\*\***

Weeks went by. The pain dulled sometimes, but it always came back: Penny would pass Seaweed in the hallway, or he would see her at the diner having dinner with Tracy, and a sharp pang would run through both their chests.

Penny, for lack of something else to do once she stopped going to rehearsals and tapings, pulled the folded-up piece of paper in her suitcase, made note of the address, and wrote a letter to Karen:

\_Dear Karen,\_

\_Sorry I didn't write sooner. Things just started happening, one after another, and I just never had a chance to think. Now, though, I have more time than I need.\_

\_I guess I'm doing all rightâ€"I'm living with my friend Tracy. You know, the girl who visited that time while I was still at Our Lady? I'm back at my old school; nothing really different there. There's really nothing much going onâ€"gosh, I sound dull. Please, write back and tell me something about you so I can at least say I've heard about something exciting, ha ha.\_

\_Really, how are you? How's everyone else? Is Judith still as crazy

as she was when I was there?\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\* \* \*

><p>A couple of days later, she received a reply:<p>

\_\*\*Dear Penny,\*\*\_

\_\*\*I was wondering when you'd finally send word back here! Took you long enough, though. If I didn't know myself better, I'd say I was getting worried.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Now, to answer your questions:\*\*\_

\_\*\*I'm fantastic. I haven't had a detention, a failing grade, or a phone call from my parents in over a month!\*\*\_

\_\*\*Everyone else is basically the same as they were when you leftâ€”oh, except Sharon went home. Her parents finally forgave her, on the condition that she take a vow of sobriety and never drink again. That's all right, thoughâ€”she was a little bit of a wet blanket sometimes, anyway. \*\*\_

\_\*\*They brought in a new girl to fill your spot, too. Her name's Ellen, and she's here on a \*\*\_\*\*scholarship.\*\*\_\*\* (Read: a total goody-two-shoes.) Which reminds me of your third question:\*\*\_

\_\*\*Yes, Judith is still a head case. In fact, she went home, too, just a couple weeks ago, after they caught her saying Hail Marys to a cat in the chapel at two o'clock in the morning. Turns out she had some kind of a mental illness. Who knew?\*\*\_

\_\*\*You didn't mention Seaweed at all in your letter. How's he?\*\*\_

\_\*\*  
>Always,<strong>\_

\_\*\*Karen\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Dear Karen,<em>

\_Wow. Judith went home, huh? I guess she really \_was \_crazy. Good to know you're doing okay.\_

\_Tracy's mother is already getting out Christmas decorations. It's strange, because Thanksgiving hasn't even happened yet, but Tracy says that Christmas is a big holiday for her mom, and she tends to start making sure decorations are where they're supposed to be a few weeks in advance. \_

\_Are you going home for Christmas?\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Dear Penny,<strong>\_

\_\*\*You didn't answer my question. How is  
Seaweed?\*\*\_

\_\*\*Always,\*\*\_

\_\*\*Karen\*\*\_

—

\* \* \*

><p><p>

\_Dear Karen,\_

\_You didn't answer mine, either. Are you going home for Christmas, or  
aren't you?\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Dear Penny,<strong>\_

\_\*\*I asked first.\*\*\_

\_\*\*I'll answer your question if you'll answer mine.  
Deal?\*\*\_

\_\*\*Always,\*\*\_

\_\*\*Karen\*\*\_

—

\* \* \*

><p><p>

\_Dear Karen,\_

\_All right, fine. Seaweed and I broke up.\_

\_Are you happy now?\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

—



\* \* \*

><p><p>

\_\*\*Pennyâ€™\*\*\_

\_\*\*NO. NO, I AM NOT HAPPY.\*\*\_\_\*\*The boy drove miles to visit you every week while you were in Catholic prison! You got kicked \*\*\_\*\*out \*\*\_\*\*of that Catholic prison for him (which, while it wasn't exactly a huge sacrifice, was a pretty big deal)! WHY DID YOU BREAK UP?\*\_\*\_

\_\*\*--Karen\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Dear Karen,<em>

\_It's complicated, and you still haven't answered my question.\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Pennyâ€™<strong>\_

\_\*\*I will answer your question when you TELL ME WHY YOU BROKE UP WITH A BOY WHO LOVED YOU. Some of us aren't lucky enough to have that luxury, if you'll remember.\*\*\_

\_\*\*--Karen\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Dear Karen,<em>

\_Oh, don't pull that. Do you really want to know? I guess it doesn't matter now, because I'm telling you whether you want to know or not, because you are getting on my nerves.\_

\_After I got back to Baltimore, my mother told me I could either never see Seaweed again, or get kicked out of the house. Of course, at that moment, I chose Seaweedâ€™and, because I had nowhere else to go, I moved in with his family. Nothing happened; it was completely innocent. (Okay, well, not completely, but not \_that\_ not innocent, either.) We didn't tell anyone besides Tracy and her boyfriend, because we thought it would make things difficult, but somehow this horrible girl at school found out and told everyone. Overnight, I became a slut. I guess I overreacted a little, and asked if I could move out of Seaweed's house and into Tracy's. He got angry, and it justâ€™ ended. That's it.\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Dear Penny,<strong>\_

â€|\_\*\*Wow. I am so sorry, Penny, I really am. If I'd known it happened like that, I wouldn't have tried so hard to get you to talk about it.\*\*\_

\_\*\*All right, maybe I would have, but I'm still sorry it happened to you.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Who's the girl who found out?\*\*\_

\_\*\*Always,\*\*\_

\_\*\*Karen\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Dear Karen,<em>

\_Her name's Amber von Tussle, and she's horrible. She and her mother tried to get Tracy (and me, plus eighteen other women) locked up in the Baltimore Women's Detention Center last year, because we were trying to integrate the TV show Tracy dances onâ€| okay, that's a long story. But Amber's just mean to everyone. What makes it worse is that she's also one of those perfect little blonde girls who get everything they wantâ€"a little like someone else I know (just joking).\_

\_Ugh. Can we talk about something else now? You never did tell me if you were going home for Christmas or not.\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Dear Penny,<strong>\_

\_\*\*Actually, she does sound a little like me. That's kind of funny.\*\*\_

\_\*\*I really prefer staying at Our Lady for Christmas to going home. I don't know, it's just that most of my family knows about "the incident" (that's how every one of them refers to it, when they talk about it at allâ€| ugh) that got me sent here, and it's just better to avoid the piercing stares and disparaging looks and questions about "how am I doing now, sweetie?". Also, in case you haven't figured it out already, my parents are a little uptight for my taste. So, no, I'm not going home for Christmas.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Always,\*\*\_

\_\*\*Karen\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Dear Karen,<em>

\_Wow. You haven't been home for Christmas since you got to Our Lady?  
That's kind of sad.\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\_\*\*\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Dear Penny,<strong>\_

\_\*\*You know what I miss? Mashed potatoes. Really good, fluffy ones  
with lumps in them. The ones here at Christmas are smooth and runny,  
and gross.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Always,\*\*\_

\_\*\*Karen\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Dear Karen,<em>

\_GUESS WHAT?\_

\_I talked to Mrs. Turnblad (that's Tracy's mom) about your mashed  
potato problem. She was shocked that a school as hoity-toity as Our  
Lady couldn't serve decent mashed potatoes on Christmas, and she said  
that it would be fine if you came HERE for Christmas, because she  
always makes enough food for an army (and, obviously, my mother won't  
be coming to dinner this year).\_

\_What do you think?\_

\_Sincerely,\_

\_Penny\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Dear Penny,<strong>\_

\_\*\*I think I'd better pack a scarf. It's cold  
out.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Always,\*\*\_

\_\*\*Karen\*\*\_

\_\*\*P.S. Thank you. Really.\*\*\_

End  
file.